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Understanding the role of ethnic online communities during the COVID-19 pandemic: A case study of Korean immigrant women’s information-seeking behaviors

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ABSTRACT

The role of social distancing, coupled with the closing down of ethnic enclaves, has led immigrants to become isolated from their ethnic groups. In this study, we investigate the increasing role of ethnic online communities in immigrants’ information-seeking behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic. An analysis of 726 posts in MissyUSA reveals how an ethnic online community helps Korean immigrant women deal with the pandemic, reflecting the essence of a community amid societal lockdown. The findings suggest that these online communities supplement immigrant women’s medical knowledge, build non-medical knowledge helpful to disadvantaged immigrants, and offer transnational knowledge regarding medical systems, products, and travel. These results provide evidence of how ethnic online communities promote immigrants’ ongoing incorporation into society through the development of domestically and transnationally engaged medical and non-medical knowledge.

1. Introduction

The coronavirus disease-19 (hereinafter, COVID-19) pandemic has disrupted every aspect of people’s daily lives. Wide-ranging changes in institutions and everyday interactions have prompted information-seeking behaviors critical in dealing with the pandemic (Bento et al., 2020; Carlson, 2020). People respond to the COVID-19 situation by immediately seeking information regarding the disease (e.g., its symptoms and prevention) at the individual and community (e.g., quarantine, school closures, and testing; Bento et al., 2020) levels. As more people search for information on COVID-19, online platforms and communities have become important means of information dissemination (Liu et al., 2020; Park et al., 2020). Social media has become a convenient source of information for many individuals dealing with the pandemic, as it facilitates the spread of information in ways that easily capture readers’ attention (Liu et al., 2020; Park et al., 2020).

The rapid spread of COVID-19 has exacerbated racial discrimination and profiling in the United States (U.S.). Given that the pandemic started in China, Asians and Asian Americans in the U.S. have witnessed extremely negative and pejorative images assigned to them (Tessler et al., 2020). The societal lockdown and social distancing rule might result in racial minority immigrants being isolated from the majority of Americans (Castañeda & Lopez, 2020). Social distancing, coupled with the lockdown of ethnic enclaves such as China and Korea towns (Gonzalez, 2020; Xu, 2020), also make it difficult for racial minority immigrants to find adequate and accurate COVID-19 information. This may be due to their limited social networks, immigration status, and inadequate English proficiency (Page et al., 2020).

Against this backdrop, the online community might rise as an important hub for racial minorities to search for useful information during the pandemic. The development of online spaces has unlocked the possibility of forming new networks that transcend the traditional forms of networks operating in the physical world, providing fruitful research sites for the study of immigrant networks, diaspora, and transnationalism (Kissau & Hunger, 2010). Prior research on ethnic online communities has suggested their role as a social capital that fosters information production and circulation. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 poses a series of other questions: What types of information do immigrants obtain during the pandemic, and how do ethnic online communities promote immigrants’ information-seeking and -sharing behaviors? Our study investigates these questions.

Examining the lives of Korean immigrants is particularly important to understand how ethnic online communities facilitate immigrants’ information search during the global health crisis. Constituting 2.4% of the 44.5 million immigrants in the U.S. in 2017 (O’Connor & Batalova, 2019), Korean immigrants are known to experience downwarded occupational mobility. They concentrate in an ethnic economy apart from the mainstream economy as business owners or employees working...
under worse environments or having inadequate benefits (e.g., health insurance) despite their relatively high levels of educational attainment (Min, 1990). For example, Korean immigrants reported the lowest health insurance rate (74.4%) compared with other immigrant groups such as Chinese (82.7%), Filipino (88.8%), and non-Hispanic white (89.4%) immigrants (Jang, 2018).

In general, immigrants face greater economic burdens and challenges in obtaining the necessary information during the pandemic because of their poverty, language barriers, and lack of health care access (Artiga et al. 2021; Cross & Gonzalez, 2021; Kraut, 2010). During the pandemic, immigrants are also less likely to avail themselves of, and most have low priority in receiving federal assistance compared with their native-born counterparts (see Mathew & Kelly, 2008). Researchers have also suggested that women are more vulnerable than men during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, a high proportion of women in China were seeking health information and help for their parents or older adults at home during the pandemic (Zhao et al. 2020) because women take on primary caregiving roles in families. As mothers and wives of 1st-generation immigrant families, often as unpaid family workers of family-owned businesses in the ethnic enclave (Min, 1990; Sanders & Nee, 1996), Korean immigrant women are obliged to look after their children, husbands, and other family members. During this pandemic, MissyUSA—one of the largest online ethnic communities of Korean immigrant women—serves to reflect these women’s concerns, aspirations, and interests to perform their responsibilities as a mother and wife in immigrant families.

By conducting a content analysis of more than 700 posts on MissyUSA, this study reveals the extent to which ethnic online communities facilitate Korean immigrant women’s prompt reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. We examine how this online community serves as an information reservoir for vulnerable Korean immigrants who tend to work in the ethnic economy (Min, 1990) and have lower incomes (e.g., median annual household income of $68,000) and a higher rate of renter-occupied household (47%) than all Asians in the U.S. (e.g., $85,800 of median household income and 41% renter-occupied, respectively; Budiman, 2021). Much of the literature on health information-seeking, including information on COVID-19, does not properly capture the ways through which users in online communities collectively construct knowledge. This study assumes that the ways in which women actively search, produce, and disseminate COVID-19-related health information serve as a litmus to observe how women carve out their own knowledge of the pandemic and how online communities work as ethnic hubs for such knowledge production.

2. Literature review

2.1. Ethnic online communities as social capital

Previous studies on online communities and ethnic media have applied social capital theories to understand the various forms, types, and production processes of information and emotional support for immigrants (Lee & Lee, 2010; Oh, 2016). Starting from Lin’s (1982) definition of social capital as material goods (e.g., houses, cars, and money) and symbolic goods (e.g., education, memberships in clubs, or reputation), Oh (2016) expanded the scope of social capital to include information. Internet-based social media and online communities serve as a quick way of circulating information, archiving experiences, exchanging opinions, and strengthening social ties (Bleich et al. 2015; Lee & Lee, 2010; Oh, 2016), which eventually promote immigrants’ adaptation and incorporation into the host societies.

Several studies have shown that immigrants use ethnic online communities as a central source of social capital and for obtaining various types of information to help them with life adaptation and challenges (Lee, 2019a; b; Oh, 2016). For instance, research on Korean immigrants found that immigrants use ethnic online communities to gather information, often on a daily basis, about the maintenance of ethnic culinary lifestyles, immigration law, transnational activities (e.g., package delivery, international wire transfer, and phone calls; Oh, 2016), jobs, child education, shopping skills, and customer reviews (Lee E, 2019; Lee CS, 2019). In addition to daily life issues, immigrants rely on ethnic online communities to search for information regarding various health issues (Lee & Lee, 2010; Oh, 2016; Park & Park, 2014), which is one of the most difficult to obtain but necessary information for immigrants’ adaptation to new societies. Research shows that immigrants search for information about cancer such as breast and cervical cancer, and other diseases, including diabetes, and medical treatment options (Kim, 2010; Park & Park, 2014).

In particular, during disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic, ethnic online communities could play a more significant role in health information-seeking. Research examining the role of social media and online communities has found that they provide new ways for the public to become involved in disaster response (Griswold, 2013). New communication technologies and social media tools help people impacted by disasters and who are otherwise overwhelmed or unwilling to handle the volume of data generated during an emergency event (Griswold, 2013). For example, people actively consulted the online community to respond to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake in China, while the online community served as a space where information was gathered and integrated (Qu et al. 2009). Beyond information, Korean immigrants shared their emotions based on their common ethnicity—as “Koreans”—on ethnic online communities while responding to the tragic event in the home country (e.g., the sinking of the Sewol ferry, which caused more than 300 deaths in 2014; Park & Kaye, 2020). Along with the growing popularity of social media and online communities as effective tools for disseminating information and responding to requests for assistance (Griswold, 2013), examining ethnic online communities from the perspective of bonding social capital will shed light on the potential role of such online media outlets during the pandemic.

2.2. The roles of ethnic online communities in immigrants’ health information-seeking

2.2.1. Ethnic online community as a functional alternative to health care professionals

Research on ethnic online communities has shown that they serve as a functional alternative to health care professionals. Kim (2010) found that Korean Americans rely on online communities to search for health insurance coverage and health-related cultural beliefs about diabetes. Korean Americans were found to rely on physicians as diabetes-related information sources less often than other Americans generally do, although they respect physicians’ authority on such matters. Some Korean Americans are less likely to ask physicians questions, and they perceive online communities as useful and trustworthy. In other words, Korean Americans are more likely to use online communities as diabetes-related information source reservoirs if they hold strong health-related cultural beliefs (Kim, 2010).

Park and Park (2014) also found that Korean immigrant women gather information on cancer through the ethnic online community. Through MissyUSA, Korean immigrant women seek advice, opinions, and interpretations of cancer-related medical terminology, medical tests, and results. They seek other nuanced medical information about cancer-related treatment, diagnosis, risk factors, alternative medicine, medication, and diets for diverse types of cancers such as liver and cervical cancer (Park & Park, 2014). They also share other information such as recommendations of doctors, hospitals, and medical insurance (Jang, 2021; Park & Park, 2014).

As noted in such studies, these immigrants perceive the Internet as a functional substitute for physicians and health care professionals in cases where patients are dissatisfied with their health care provider (Tustin, 2010). This is because these online communities offer experiential information and medical facts in a convenient and cost-effective manner (Camerini et al. 2010). Previous studies have found that individuals with less social support are more inclined to participate actively in
online communities (e.g., Cummings et al., 2002). They also found that an ethnic online community serves as an invaluable source of information for immigrants who encounter isolation, vulnerability, and a lack of dependable information sources in an unfamiliar social and cultural environment.

In particular, the scope of health information offered by MissyUSA is tailored to meet the needs of ethnic and racial minorities. Community users, who share similar cultural and linguistic barriers to other immigrants, share their experiences and lessons learned pertaining to access to U.S. health care systems, provide recommendations on doctors (in the U.S.) who can speak Korean, offer tips on visiting doctors in Korea, and provide suggestions on receiving alternative or oriental medicine (Kim & Yoon, 2012; Oh, 2016; Park & Park, 2014). The global outbreak of COVID-19 offers another opportunity to observe the extent to which ethnic online communities serve to provide medical information for immigrants.

2.2.2. Ethnic online communities as a bonding social capital among ethnic minorities

One important characteristic of ethnic online communities for immigrants is their operation as a bonding social capital that connects ethnically and linguistically homogeneous individuals together, thus facilitating their sharing of past and current experiences, information, and knowledge. Bonding social capital is a type of social capital that characterizes connections within a group or community with a high level of similarity in terms of demographic characteristics, attitudes, and availability of information and resources. Unlike bridging social capital, bonding social capital appears more inclusively across similar groups of people (Leonard, 2004; Poortinga, 2006; Putnam, 2000). In other words, it exists between “people like us” who are “in it together” and who typically have strong and close relationships (Leonard, 2004; Poortinga, 2006). Research on ethnic online communities as bonding social capital has suggested that the similar status of members fosters camaraderie among them through the strong bond of trust and solidarity (see Oh, 2016). In online communities, information about individual members and their unique attributes that personalize members of a group promotes attachment to individual members of the group.

Ethnic online communities operate based on ethnic language, ethnic culture, culinary lifestyle, rituals, and habits. For example, narratives on the retention of Korean culinary practices, such as how to cook the traditional Korean dish, Kimchi, have been shared among Korean immigrant women in an ethnic online community. Such narratives cannot be found in places other than the ethnic online communities where users share a common language, ethnic culture, and rituals that bind them together. Owing to this similar composition of users in the U.S. (e.g., gender, race or ethnicity, language, and immigration status), disadvantaged immigrants search for and share information that suits the needs of their disadvantaged status. In particular, the shared experiences of possessing language barriers and employment-related difficulties among Korean immigrants in the U.S. and Canada make them highly ethnically attached (Chan & Fong, 2012). The information available on the website helps them navigate their challenging situation in host countries (Chan & Fong, 2012). Community users share their neglected positions and disadvantaged experiences of living as sojourners in the host society. Therefore, the information available in an ethnic online community can be customized and rightly adapted for disadvantaged ethnic immigrants who have precarious immigration status and lack secure medical insurance, language proficiency, and knowledge about the U.S. medical system.

Such sharing of information promotes immigrants’ incorporation into society by providing diverse and practical information about residences, child education, legal status, ethnic cuisines, and transnational plans (Lee, 2010; Oh, 2016). As these online communities are widely available and are easily accessible, the magnitude of information and knowledge that they provide is broad and deep, covering information often ignored by the mainstream media as well as information not readily available to the general public. Several studies on MissyUSA also suggest that it serves as a site to build bonding social capital, thus providing private health information to manage cancer and diabetes (Kim, 2010; Oh, 2016; Park & Park, 2014). Immigrants who are not accustomed to public media might feel more comfortable accessing information about jobs, residence, and information on destination countries and health-related matters from online communities.

2.2.3. Ethnic online communities as a medium for transnational ties

Ethnic online communities are a medium for creating and maintaining transnational ties and producing transnational information. Ethnic online communities not only circulate information about destination countries but also maintain transnational information related to home countries, stimulating collective pasts and contemporary memories of the homeland (Vertovec, 2004). The scope of information generated by online communities and social media in an era of globalization transcends the traditional boundaries of national territories and sovereignties. As media operates as an important means for reconfiguring the imagination of the nation-state and national identity (Appadurai, 1996; Fernandes, 2000), these online spaces have become “derterritorializing” forces (Yin, 2015). Scholars have examined how these online spaces have operated as the central means of communication across geographically dispersed communities (Kissau & Hunger, 2010).

In ethnic online communities, individuals can publish information about their home country’s or their diaspora’s situation because of their ties with their homeland through transnational economic, social, cultural, and political participation (Lee, 2020; Parham, 2004; Park & Kaye, 2020; Vertovec, 2004). Ethnic online communities offer a practical private space to share current day-to-day and nostalgic information concerning medical issues, jobs, education, and so on, originating from the home countries (Lee, 2013; Oh, 2016). They also offer space to discuss the political and public agendas of the host country or even beyond (Kissau & Hunger, 2008; Yin, 2015). For example, recent studies revealed that ethnic online communities promote and support transnational protests against the home country, even among Korean immigrant women in the U.S. (Lee, 2020; Park & Kaye, 2020). An empirical study of Korean online communities in Canada showed that recently formed ethnic communities virtually expanded the ethnic bubble, which may mean self-segregation among ethnic groups. However, these online communities constantly reconnected the migrant community to its homeland compared with ethnic enclaves, indicating that it is a part of cultural adjustment (Yoon, 2017). While prior studies suggest that transnational ties and information provide a buffer to immigrants and facilitate their incorporation into host societies (Oh, 2016; Tamaki, 2011), there is scant information available on immigrants’ health outcomes.

This study assumes that Korean immigrant women’s information-seeking and knowledge production related to COVID-19 is an epistemological juncture of how ethnic online communities facilitate incorporation. Thus, the study examines Korean immigrant women’s information-seeking behavior concerning COVID-19, especially the types of information and knowledge for which they search. In this study, we posit that information-seeking is by nature a dialectical process in which individuals search for information but also contribute to producing knowledge simultaneously by asking questions, offering answers, and sharing a broad range of medical and non-medical information. This study contributes to the literature on migration and health by identifying that ethnically oriented membership resulting from similar experiences and situations, the ethnic language used, cultural background, and ties to the homeland allows Korean immigrant women to participate in prompt information-seeking even during COVID-19. This exemplifies the essential roles of ethnic online communities in immigrants’ adaptation to host societies during the pandemic.
3. Data and methods

3.1. MissyUSA

There are several ethnic online communities of Korean immigrants in the U.S. that provide area-specific information such as Los Angeles (RadioKorea; www.radiokorea.com) and New York (www.heykorean.com), information related to jobs (WorkingUS; www.workingus.com), and information about purchasing products (Missycoupons; www.missycoupons.com). Among the many Korean online communities, MissyUSA (www.MissyUSA.com)—initiated as a small online café by wives of Korean international students and later becoming independent in 2002 (Lee, 2020)—is the largest, with more than 400,000 married Korean women members residing in the U.S. and Canada (Lee, 2013). This platform, a “crucial” space for Korean immigrant women (Lee, 2019), has received the most attention from scholars (Lee, 2019; Lee, 2020; Oh, 2016; Park & Park, 2014).

Previous studies found MissyUSA to be a unique virtual space that serves to provide social capital to Korean immigrant women, offering them information on subjects ranging from cuisine to legal issues and transnational plans (Oh, 2016). MissyUSA also serves as a space for women to vent their emotions as immigrants, wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law (Lee, 2013) or as a space that encourages them to discuss recent social and political issues and participate in social movements such as the Sewol ferry protest (Lee, 2020). This online community has been the central focus of health researchers as a public space where many Korean immigrant women search for information on various diseases and treatments, such as cancer (Park & Park, 2014) and diabetes (Kim, 2010).

3.2. Methods

There are eight different web boards with relevant subcategories on the MissyUSA website, where Korean immigrant women can upload and read postings related to health, food, motherhood, and so on. For this study, to search for posts about COVID-19, we chose a web board where even non-members can search and read posts regarding various life matters, whereas other web boards require membership. As Lee (2013) pointed out, MissyUSA is a popular ethnic online community for members and non-members who actively seek a wide range of information in the U.S.

We used the keywords “Corona” and “COVID” to identify posts published between January 2020 and April 2020 on the web board. We found a total sample of 746 posts, of which we excluded 20 posts because of duplication or those referring to Corona, a city located in California. Finally, 726 valid posts were included in the dataset. It is unknown to what extent information circulated on online platforms is a reliable source that reflects reality and to what extent users of online communities trust and use such information in their daily lives. We could not find any personal information in any of the posts retrieved. In this study, we anonymized the names on the web boards and paraphrased the direct quotes from the postings for ethical considerations. Although no human beings actually participated in our study, we applied for the Institutional Review Board’s (IRB) review and received an exemption from the organization, with which the corresponding author is affiliated (IRB #: non2020-004).

We followed Oh’s (2016) approach of treating ethnic online communities as a valid place for accumulating social capital and resources. In particular, the MissyUSA platform is distinguished for being of high quality in terms of disseminating married women’s knowledge of immigration-related information. It has a network whose membership is open only to Korean-born immigrant women (comprising a large base of anonymous members), thus spurting the production of high-quality information (Oh, 2016).

3.3. Analysis

The data obtained from MissyUSA were organized in Microsoft Excel and analyzed using the Atlas.ti 8.0 software. Two independent coders collected the data and discussed the inclusion and exclusion criteria for COVID-19-related posts. The validity of the data was cross-checked by each coder. The two coders had a weekly virtual meeting for about 6 months to develop and revise the codebook based on major themes and subthemes and make comparisons until an inter-rater agreement was reached. The initial codebook had a set of coding schemes that grasped a range of content delivered in the posts, including (a) medical (prevention, test, diagnosis, treatment, quarantine, and the health care system) and (b) non-medical (cooking, activities, purchase, travel, remote work, friends and social networks, remittances, and health insurance) categories.

After finalizing the coding of the entire data, we evaluated the empirical findings in light of the existing literature on health and migration. We analyzed the data to determine the types of medical and non-medical information these immigrants searched for and what that means in relation to the media’s role in information-seeking. Three important themes about how MissyUSA operates as a powerful reservoir of medical and non-medical information emerged: (a) it supplements immigrant women’s insufficient medical knowledge concerning the U.S. health system; (b) it disseminates ethnic-oriented medical information that is beneficial to disadvantaged Koreans; (c) it offers transnational medical and non-medical knowledge regarding medical systems, products, and travel. Both authors are fluent in Korean and English; thus, they both participated in the translation of the posts from Korean to English.

4. Findings

Three major themes related to COVID-19 emerged from the collected MissyUSA data (Table 1): lack of information, vulnerability, and transnationalism. Each major theme had corresponding subthemes. While multiple codes could be assigned to a single post, “lack of information” was the most frequent major theme; approximately 80% of COVID-19 posts were related to this theme. The subthemes revolved around information about COVID-19, such as why people call it “COVID-19” or “coronavirus,” whether a vaccine or any treatment methods are available, and the current spread status of COVID-19. Other subthemes revolved around the medical aspects of COVID-19, including symptoms, diagnosis, preventive measures (e.g., masks, hand sanitizers, and products for boosting the immune system), treatment, and self-quarantine.

The next frequently discussed theme was “vulnerability.” Nearly one-third of COVID-19 posts on MissyUSA were concerned with the vulnerability of Korean immigrant women during the pandemic. While some Korean immigrant women mentioned their worries about commuting and working from home, others shared their anxieties about operating their businesses as Asian immigrant entrepreneurs. Criticizing the U.S. health care system, some of them were anxious about not being able to receive timely COVID-19 testing and treatment because of language barriers, uninsured status, or immigrant status. For them, Korean ethnic enclaves, where many Korean communities, restaurants, and markets are located, constituted the focal places for sharing and disseminating COVID-19 information and offering free testing.

Finally, about one in ten COVID-19 posts were related to “transnational ties with the home country.” Korean immigrant women sought information about immigration policies and asked for opinions from other users on whether it would be safer for them to return to the US with their visas or for their family members to stay with them in the U.S. The other subthemes dealt with information relating to the medical system in Korea (e.g., the price for getting COVID-19 testing and treatments done in Korea) and remittances (e.g., sending and receiving masks to and from Korea).
We found that the ethnic online community serves as a place for Korean immigrant women to seek information that supplements their insufficient medical knowledge of COVID-19. Specifically, some Korean immigrants (e.g., undocumented groups) have limited access to health care or suffer from language barriers that prevent them from understanding health information provided by the U.S. government during the pandemic. Korean immigrant women who participate in MissyUSA seemed to have become information producers and consumers that join ethnic online communities to share, consume, and produce health information actively in the Korean language. While the Centers for Disease and Control, government officials, and health professionals made announcements about the number of confirmed cases, quarantine rules, and self-treatment methods, the rapid spread of the disease and its urgency resulted in information gaps between patients and health professionals. Many individuals needed more detailed and context-based information, and the ethnic online community functioned as an appropriate space for circulating and seeking medical information that supplements Korean immigrant women’s knowledge of the pandemic.

Most of the information on the platform dealt with self-quarantine rules, self-diagnoses, tests, and treatments available at hospitals. Not necessarily agreeing that self-quarantine is a sufficient response, users were curious to know if quarantine worked as a complete treatment without the assistance of medical professionals. Women heatedly discussed their own ways of practicing self-quarantine, spoke about how to stay separate from family members while being in the same house, and gave their own tips on how to assess if one’s quarantine was going to be terminated. Korean immigrant women desperately wanted detailed information on self-quarantine, such as the symptoms of COVID-19, the degree or severity of symptoms to be tested, the duration of self-quarantine and hospitalization, and the overall treatment provided in hospitals. All these suggest the complex nature of COVID-19 and the necessity for equally complex situation-based information to cope with it.

Recognizing that the medical system is generally overloaded with many other patients, individuals asked the following questions: “Is it appropriate to be hospitalized?”; “What symptoms are critical for one to be hospitalized?”; “When is it appropriate for one to be hospitalized?” As these questions suggest, MissyUSA operates as a space where Korean immigrant women can seek appropriate information on COVID-19 promptly. Admitting that they were scared, sad, and ignorant about the disease, many women displayed the need to acquire detailed medical information—from the practice of self-quarantine to the medical treatments available. For example, one woman asked whether the symptoms of COVID-19 are similar to those of pneumonia, revealing their lack of medical knowledge, while other users also accepted that they were ignorant of the current medical information. Some other users directly recommended hospitals or places that they could visit for check-ups. They expressed worry and frustration, as the U.S. government did not provide sufficient information about the process of diagnosis and hospitalization and claimed having the right to know about the situation. The virtual world opened the possibility for people to fill their medical knowledge gaps.

Another clear theme that emerged in the online community was the usefulness and effectiveness of various medicines and the types of medicines that could be purchased. One woman said that she bought TyleNol because she heard that it was good for COVID-19 but was still uncertain about its effectiveness. Another woman asked for information on which one would be more effective for COVID-19 between TyleNol and Motrin and whether children should take the TyleNol syrup or the pill. An active discussion on which medicines to buy and what kind of self-therapy to practice for the immune system confirmed the lack of medical information among ordinary individuals. Furthermore, several users were asked about fever-relieving medicines such as TyleNol, Advil, and Motrin, and various types of vitamin pills. As individuals were generally not sure if TyleNol really worked, they only speculated that these
Another stream of information that appeared in the community addressed possible hate crimes and attacks against Asians and Asian Americans. Women warned other members to use masks when visiting Korea towns because of the possible hate crimes targeting Asians. There have been several media reports on hate crimes against Asians; as such, people started circulating tips on how to defend or guard themselves against possible misfortunes. Several posts suggest that Korean immigrant women were concerned about visiting ethnic enclaves such as the Korean market and restaurants in Korea towns. Other users brought up their experiences of visiting H-mart in Atlanta, San Francisco, and other cities and shared how other people showed up with masks and other tools to protect themselves. In another post, a user stated that she delayed her plans to visit the New York Consulate to extend her visa because of possible racial crimes. These posts acknowledge that racism has become a serious issue in the U.S., so that users express anxiety, concern, and fear and share information on how to avoid discrimination and protect oneself.

Finally, information that can be shared only among ethnic immigrants appeared in the community, suggesting that the community serves as a virtual enclave where Korean women can discuss specific topics related to ethnic places, communities, and organizations. Women users frequently asked whether Korean markets and H-mart in certain cities, such as Atlanta and Los Angeles, are safe enough to visit and if there are many confirmed patients in the neighborhood. For example, one woman expressed her hesitation to visit a Korean market in Atlanta, asking “What’s the atmosphere like there?,” because her family lives in the countryside without COVID-19 confirmed cases. Questions about safety issues in markets, restaurants, and other shops located in Korea and China towns were posted frequently. Whether these places are sufficiently hygienic or whether any confirmed patients have visited these places are questions which answers were not readily available in other media outlets or public forums. As ethnic minorities, only Koreans understood the importance of visiting Korea or China towns. The presence of such household-related topics, including visits to Korean food markets, restaurants, shops, towns, and the neighborhood, is linked to the fact that Korean American women, seemingly positioned in the middle-class background, take greater accountability for household chores compared with men. Although not directly quoted in this study, it is evident that the main concerns of Korean American women lay in the normal maintenance of households for family members’ health and well-being. This includes cooking, disinfection, or cleaning, purchasing goods, managing children’s online education, and errand running for family members.

The sharing of tips and advice on when and how to visit Korean ethnic places—the Korean association, self-help organizations, Korea town, the neighborhood, Korean food markets, and restaurants—shows how Korean immigrant women collectively participate in knowledge production based on their ethnic status. This also affirms that the online community serves as a place where immigrant users strengthen and build social capital, which is especially useful for ethnic minority immigrants in the U.S. Thus, Korean immigrant women’s dependence on MissyUSA for medical and non-medical knowledge search is a proof of how ethnic online communities mediate immigrant women’s response to COVID-19 and contribute toward their continuous adaptation and incorporation in the U.S.

4.3. Seeking transnational information about medical system, travel plans, and products

The ethnic online community operates as a place where Korean immigrant women share and circulate transnational information about medical systems, travel plans, and products between Korea and the U.S. The transnational nature of information-seeking behaviors for medical and non-medical knowledge was evident in women’s questions that compared the products, ideas, behaviors, and systems of the two countries. Most women wanted to know how the Korean medical system handled
COVID-19 as a reference to enhance their medical knowledge in the U.S. Owing to the fame of K-quarantine, many individuals displayed intense curiosity and asked questions regarding the ways in which the South Korean government provided tests, treatments, and other medical services. Immigrant women considered the South Korean government’s test and treatment plans as a reference for comparison when navigating information about the medical test and treatment in the U.S. to assess whether they were sufficiently advanced. As suggested in the transnational and health literature (Oh, 2016), women’s participation in the creation of transnationally engaged knowledge epitomizes women’s active response to the pandemic. For instance, several women asked, “How do they treat confirmed patients in Korea?” and “Do they receive treatment at home? Are they hospitalized?” All these show that knowing how the Korean government handles COVID-19 promotes women’s knowledge of the pandemic.

Korean women showed considerable interest in the process of diagnosis, treatment, and hospitalization. This type of information was not widely available in the media of the host country; thus, people sought information from other Korean women users who have friends and families back in Korea. Women asked if COVID-19 tests were freely available in Korea, as people lacking health insurance in the U.S. developed concerns and fears around getting tests done in U.S. hospitals. The high cost of medical services in the U.S. made women constantly refer to the overall medical system in Korea, resulting in women actively searching for information about when and how they should visit hospitals for diagnosis and treatment in the U.S. Given the public service of notifying the movement map of confirmed patients and their release in Korea, women were inquiring about ways to obtain similar information in the U.S.

Another important topic involved the best ways to plan and make decisions regarding traveling back to Korea (e.g., “Which place do you think is safer: Korea or America?”), purchasing products from Korea, sending products to Korea, or receiving them from Korea. Given the frequent travel between Korea and the US, Korean immigrant women sought advice on how to coordinate or change their travel plans. Furthermore, women’s narratives showed transnational exchanges of various products between the two countries. They asked about what to buy or order from Korea for the well-being of families and friends in the U.S. and how they could send products and items to families and friends in Korea at lower costs during the pandemic.

Several women asked about other people’s decisions regarding traveling to Korea, inquiring about the likelihood of being infected at airports and in planes, the strategies to save on the costs of cancelling flight tickets and hotels, and how to coordinate their children’s enrollments. Furthermore, many women sought and compared information between the two countries regarding the exchange of various health supplement products, masks, sanitizers, quarantine caps, and disposable gloves. Such frequently appearing discussions illustrate how the online community operates as a central site for producing and utilizing transnationally engaged information and subsequent knowledge regarding the comparisons of medical systems, products, and travel plans between the two countries. Women’s search for transationally engaged health information proves the extent to which ethnic online communities operate as a space to support immigrants’ continuous coping with the pandemic and their consequent acculturation in the U.S.

5. Discussion

This study found that the ethnic online community, MissyUSA, operates as an information reservoir for Korean immigrant women’s search for COVID-19-related information. The community was shown to play an essential role in helping Korean immigrant women (a) seek medical information to supplement their insufficient medical knowledge regarding COVID-19, (b) share information to help vulnerable Korean immigrants, and (c) offer transnational medical and non-medical information about medical systems, travel plans, and products. Ethically nuanced knowledge originating from the homeland and destination country helps alleviate immigrants’ hardships in information management during COVID-19, bolstering immigrants’ acculturation and incorporation during these historically unprecedented times. As a place for searching for information and developing knowledge that significantly assists Korean immigrant women, the MissyUSA community functions as a virtual space that is comparable to physical ethnic enclaves and organizations during the pandemic.

The findings of this research offer fruitful theoretical insights to migration and health scholars regarding the utility of transnational ties and transnational medical and non-medical information. While some studies suggest that transnational information might buffer immigrants and assist them in acculturating themselves into host societies (Oh, 2016; Tamaki, 2011), there have been few discussions on areas of health information. Our results suggest that transnational information in an online setting may allow racial and ethnic migrants to gain better access to health information and health care management in the receiving countries. Consequently, such transnationally obtained information about COVID-19 may accelerate their continuous settlement and adaptation in the U.S. Specifically, the existence of ethnic online communities does not indicate their retreat from mainstream society. However, transnationally engaged information through virtual platforms might make immigrants appreciate improved medical and non-medical knowledge of the pandemic and eventually support immigrants’ incorporation into the host societies.

The findings of this research also contribute to the role of ethnic online communities in health information-seeking during disasters such as the COVID-19. Previous work on ethnic online communities have examined how they facilitated immigrants’ adaptation in the host countries (Lee E, 2019; Lee CS, 2019; Oh, 2016), but our work approaching ethnic online communities as bonding social capital, based on members’ shared use of language and common understanding of ethnic culture, sheds light on how it can be a powerful virtual space for searching for health information during the pandemic. In addition to the growing academic attention paid to social media and online communities during disasters, we bring the concept of social capital into an examination of ethnic online communities during an urgent situation of the pandemic when the lockdown has prevented the physical contact of people. The shared use of Korean language and ethnic culture, including culinary culture, ethnic enclaves, homeland health insurance, and other systems, allow immigrants to pull useful health information to quickly respond to disastrous situations.

The results of this study advance those of previous research reporting incremental racial discrimination and difficulties during the global pandemic (Tessler et al., 2020), showing how racial minorities, such as Korean immigrants, respond to their limited access to resources and collectively work to coproduce helpful information for survival. Given the barriers to the U.S. health system and the highly enforced social distancing rule during the pandemic, the information available to disadvantaged individuals has been insufficient. As shown in this study, Korean immigrants experience feelings of insecurity and vulnerability, and their membership enables them to produce ethnically informative information. This is in line with the findings of previous studies arguing that ethnic media is a channel for minorities to adapt better in host societies (Chan & Fong, 2012; Yoon, 2017; Zhou & Cai, 2002). Further, as transmigrants who reimage the nation-state and maintain dual ties (Appadurai, 1996; Fernandes, 2000), Korean immigrants collectively promote transnational information that might useful for many immigrants to cope with COVID-19 in the U.S.

There may be a concern about the quality of health information sought by immigrant women through ethnic online communities due to the absence of health professionals and the accurate monitoring of knowledge production. However, the goal of this study is not to gauge whether ethnic online communities have become a medium for accurate medical information production. Instead, this study aims to understand whether ethnic online communities operate as a place to share and coproduce medical and non-medical knowledge for immigrants who
have limited access to reliable institutions offering information in English. One might question the accuracy and validity of these medical information-seeking behaviors. Nevertheless, there is rigorous evidence to observe how the virtual world and internet communities become ever more useful and significant for vulnerable populations, such as undocumented immigrants, during the lockdown.

This study has several limitations and offers suggestions for future studies. First, MissyUSA membership is limited to married Korean immigrant women in the U.S. or Canada. Thus, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all Korean immigrants. Although not thoroughly discussed in this study, the gendered nature of Korean immigrant women’s information-seeking is clear, as manifested in their search for household chores and childrearing. For many middle-class Korean immigrant families, women play a critical role in operating and managing domestic work. Hence, this gendered division of labor is reflected in Korean immigrant women’s information-seeking behaviors in the community. Future research examining the potential roles of MissyUSA in women’s challenges with domestic work responsibilities, particularly the burdens of mothering practices during the pandemic, would be noteworthy. Furthermore, the types and intensity of seeking and sharing COVID-19 information might be different in other Korean online communities such as WorkingUS. Additionally, conversations and information-seeking in ethnic online communities among Korean immigrants might be different in other host nations, as each destination country has different numbers of COVID-19 confirmed cases, health care systems, and sizes of Korean communities.

While an ethnic online community can provide emotional support in addition to information (Oh, 2016), this study focused mainly on the functionality of information-seeking and sharing. As individuals’ emotional well-being is known to be threatened during the pandemic (Ladetz et al. 2020), how members of an ethnic online community share emotions and reasure each other could be investigated in future studies. We hope that this study—one of the first attempts to understand the Korean minorities’ COVID-19 information-seeking behaviors via ethnic online communities—will offer a solid foundation for future studies.

Conflict of Interest statements

There is no conflict of interest for this research.

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