Information sharing in community associations: Asian immigrants’ experiences

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ABSTRACT
Dealing with information in a new land is considered challenging for immigrants. Their adaptation process, including how to seek and share information, usually requires supports from several sources, including various social and community associations. This paper discusses immigrants’ information sharing practices within community groups during their settlement processes. Data for analysis includes 197 questionnaires, 35 interviews, and 258 photos. The preliminary results show that Asian immigrants are involved in community associations and online links with both general and particular groupings. The main sharing activities relate to daily activities, culture and religion and knowledge/experience. The findings will provide insights of how sharing activities within community associations support immigrants’ settlement.

Keywords
Information sharing, Asian immigrants, community associations, social media, settlement.

INTRODUCTION
In a new country, community associations allow immigrants to meet new people, follow their interests, and engage in social activities. While community associations have some official structures and administration, a central characteristic is their informality. Consisting of new acquaintances and more distant friends, they can be considered as weak ties which play a different role to strong ties (Granovetter, 1973). Community associations act as an information source which can be considered very valuable for settling into a community (Granovetter, 1973), providing an ‘informal network support’ in immigrants’ settlement (Caidi, Allard, & Quirke, 2010). While the family and close friends provide what is called ‘strong ties’, through emotional support and cultural traditions, the ‘weak ties’ of more distant association may provide access to new, differing types of information, such as employment opportunities and local community activities.

Information sharing, an aspect of information behaviour, is an important but understudied area (Du, Liu, Zhu, & Chen, 2013; Savolainen, 2015), particularly for immigrant populations. Information sharing studies the communications of information between people, as well as the interactions between people, groups, organisations, and technologies (Du, 2014). A recent study by Quyyum, Thompson, Kennan, and Lloyd (2014) discusses information provision and information sharing between refugees and information providers, highlighting how refugees find the information environment both complex and difficult to navigate.

This study investigates immigrants’ information sharing activities within community groupings where Asian immigrants involve themselves in meeting with others in both local communities and online. It explores sharing interactions and how information flows in those places. Some identified information needs, relating to jobs, education, and meeting new friends (Khoir, Du, & Koronios, 2015), are central in information sharing between immigrants. Several facts lead to the significance of the study. Firstly, the number of Asian immigrants is increasing in South Australia, particularly from India, China, Vietnam, Philippines, and Malaysia, accounting for 73.9% of the total Asian immigrants in 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Thus, further research is needed to support the settlement of these immigrants (Khoir et al., 2015). Secondly, given the complexity of the information landscape and the information needs of immigrants, the role of information sharing is a significant dimension to the immigrant’s experience of settlement (Caidi et al., 2010). This is also because information practice research for immigrants has mainly focused on task-based information activities (Caidi et al., 2010). Finally, while some existing studies discuss information sharing of immigrants and refugees individually, limited studies focus on discussing immigrants’ information sharing within community groups.

In this study, community associations are defined as groups that are either open to all (e.g. tennis, parents, book, and health groups) or professionally-based groups, or groups based on specific characteristics (e.g. ethnicity, religious or cultural groups). Online associations, facilitated through
digital technology, are also investigated. Information sharing refers to how information is produced, consumed and passed on and the possible benefits to the receivers. In this paper, we address three research questions:

1. What type of associations do immigrants join to enable information sharing and participation in multicultural arenas?
2. What sort of sharing activities do immigrants participate in within community associations?
3. How do online associations facilitate information sharing for immigrants?

The results will provide better understanding into how Asian immigrants share information and interact in their social life during their settlement, in both physical and online environments. Digital technology has profoundly altered both how people interact and share knowledge with each other and how they stay connected with people. However, face-to-face associations are still important.

DATA COLLECTION

Study participants
Involving Asian immigrants from India, China, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia who live in Adelaide, South Australia, our participants were screened using the definition of immigrant provided by Caidi et al. (2010, p. 495): “international migrants include anyone living outside their country of citizenship but the condition of permanence in the term ‘immigrant’ excludes those living abroad temporarily, such as visitors, migrant workers, and international students”. The participants in this study, therefore, were those who were not born in Australia; hold permanent resident visas or have become citizens; are not visitors or international students.

Stratified sampling (Fowler, 2009) was used as a purposive sampling technique to assure participants reflected the population distribution of existing Asian immigrants. The targeted participants were approached through e-mails, telephone, and face-to-face invitations. Finally, 197 immigrants agreed to participate in the study. Of these, 35 participants were prepared to do the photovoice and interviews (see later).

The participants came from India (28%), China (22%), Vietnam (19%), Malaysia (17%), and Philippines (14%) with 43% males and 57% females. Dominated by young adults, the age ranges of the participants were 18-25 (15%), 26-45 (68%), 46-65 (17%), and over 66 (0.5%). Slightly more than half had been in Australia less than 5 years (55%) and are deemed as newcomers. The participants worked in various sectors: industry (37%), academia (23%), government (11%), and volunteer (9%). Nearly half of them had children (48%). 31% were Australian citizens and 58% indicated their desire to become citizens.

Survey
Both online (30%) and printed (70%) versions of the approximately 20 minute survey were employed. Both used English, although other language versions from the participants’ countries were offered. The online survey used www.surveygizmo.com, and was published via several channels, including the first and second authors’ university homepages, community and professional mailing lists, social media accounts, and through personal emails. The printed version was distributed via public libraries, community centers, and personal networks. The questions included the types of community groups participants join and how the groups facilitate their settlement. The first author visited five public libraries to approach and help the participants to fill in the survey. The printed survey data was manually entered into the surveygizmo system. The survey data were then imported and analyzed descriptively using SPSS 21 to predict trends, including frequency and percentage.

Photovoice and interviews
Using a visual method has been seen as a valuable method in information behavior research (Julien, Given, & Opyrshko, 2013). Photovoice is such a method that enables participants to express their voice through photos (Wang & Burris, 1997), in this case capturing images reflecting their information behavior and sharing. A brief training was given covering procedures, photo samples, and ethical issues of privacy. Each of the 35 participants took between 5 and 7 photographs, totaling 258. Post-photo interviews with the researcher discussing the photos lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and took place at locations convenient to the participants. These interviews allowed participants to tell their stories behind the photos and share their feelings in a comfortable and informal situation. The interview transcriptions were analyzed using content analysis and classified into themes based on the discussions. The themes that emerged reflected and extended the survey results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participation in community groups
In the community groups, it can be seen that general associations provide important connections with people with similar interests and concerns, while ethnic and religious associations may connect the immigrants with their own cultural backgrounds. The survey results are summarized into broad categories (Table 1). The results of photovoice and the interviews were used to complement the survey, providing deeper insight into the participants’ experience of living in a new country.

Community associations are important media connecting immigrants to specific populations based on various criteria (Table 1) including religion (e.g. Adelaide Hindu temple, Buddhist association), ethnicity (e.g. Bengali association, Chinese overseas association), general (e.g. St. John’s ambulance, knitting club), education (e.g. Chinese student association, a university student association), sport (e.g. gym, Adelaide swimming club), and professional (e.g. government employees health association, general practitioner association).
Information sharing activities

Everyday information sharing
The complexity of daily information needs requires immigrants to actively seek information from various sources. The participants found that community associations provided a good opportunity to connect with other people in day-to-day sharing activities, including parenting and general health information.

One participant from Malaysia enjoyed participating in a parents’ club at her daughter’s kindergarten. The parents had a regular meeting to discuss and share issues related to their children. Topics discussed included food, books, tips for looking after children, kids’ activities, and organizing activities for school holidays. She found this information very useful in enriching her experience of raising her 5-year-old daughter alone in Australia.

A Chinese participant shared her experience in obtaining information regarding health from the Chinese Overseas Associations, showing a photo of a pap-smear brochure. She explained that the association had a health information session on pap-smears and breast checks as part of the Australian health campaign. The association was not only communicating the information, but also organizing check-up appointments with a particular health clinic.

Cultural and religious information sharing
Being a newcomer in a country with a markedly different culture requires an extended adaptation process. The process is facilitated when immigrants are able to maintain their cultural and religious identity. Participating in ethnic and religious associations enables immigrants to preserve their own culture in a multicultural Australia.

For instance, a participant from India, involved in the Indian Tamil community association, spoke about its celebrations of festivals. The association holds a Diwali (Festival of Light) every year and presents cultural activities including dancing, foods, and henna hand-painting. Local Australians are invited to participate in this festival. This sharing of cultural events strengthens the bonding between the Indian community members as well as introducing and preserving their culture in Australia. The process of integration does not require the immigrants to lose their original identity, but rather enables important aspects of their culture to co-exist with the new culture (Berry, 2001).

Knowledge/experience information sharing
It was found that being in a new land increases immigrants’ willingness to share knowledge. This may be due to the feeling of sympathy they develop for others going through similar experiences and their willingness to pass on any knowledge they have gained.

For example, a participant from Malaysia, whose English is reasonably good, was actively involved as a volunteer in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. People in the class varied in terms of age, living period in Australia, and job status. However, this class was not just about language; it acted as a site for sharing information related to other things, such as school and university assignments and practical information on job hunting and applications. As an immigrant, this volunteer was able to assist fellow immigrants from first-hand experience of their needs.

Online information sharing
Recent technological developments ameliorate the problems of distance. Technology allows immigrants to stay connected with their home country family and friends. The participants also use social media and chatting applications to communicate broadly within their own ethnicities both in Australia and their home country. They use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google+, YouTube, WeChat (Weixin), WhatsApp, and Line on smartphones and computers.

Analyzing the photo and interview data shows that the participants created on-line groups. For instance, using the most popular Chinese chatting applications WeChat or Weixin, the participants from China created a group and shared information with other Chinese within the group. The shared information was mainly about their experience in Australia, with personal updates and daily information. Within the chatting application, the form of information is not only text, but also audio, video, and images with phone and video calls. Osatuyi (2013) emphasizes the interactive and dynamic dimensions of online sharing activities in social media. Online discussion forums also provide opportunities to share and receive information. Some Chinese participants created a WeChat group to share and discuss their children development. Meeting each other at a childcare center, the Chinese parents continue to share and exchange ideas and experience regarding their children’s development through online applications. Online community sharing may foster social ties, serve to keep people up-to-date with news, and help to develop a more nuanced expertise (Martin, 2014).

Based on the findings, a model is developed (Figure 1). The figure shows that the information sharing within community associations has two main dimensions; mode and outcome. The mode may be physical (face-to-face) or virtual. The outcomes are divided into three main areas of sharing related to everyday living, culture, and knowledge/experience. The

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of community association</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home country/ethnic</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profession</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>132</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 1. Community associations joined by Asian immigrants
modes and their outcomes support each other and reinforce the settlement process.

Figure 1. Community associations and information sharing activities during immigrants’ settlement

CONCLUSION
This study suggests that involvement in community groupings is significant and assists with immigrants’ entry into the broader community in their new country. Involvement in groupings based on culture and ethnicity develops a ‘second family’ and reinforces linkages back to their homeland. Immigrants need linkages that are both strong and weak in order to settle into a new country. The experience of participating in both strong and weak tie groupings creates a feeling of security, contributing to both the immigrant’s personal experience and that of the broader multicultural society. It is also noted that online media provide a convenient space to interact, promising an alternative mode of community interactions. The broader the immigrants’ network the more opportunities they may have for information access and sharing.

The use of three methods in this research, which is the basis of an innovatory perspective, allows a migrant-centered perspective with the personal expression of participants’ circumstances, giving them a voice that helps to overcome the impersonality of a survey and the language limitations. Future research should provide a more comprehensive story of information sharing in social interactions, including how immigrants use social media to share information and identifying sharing sites other than community groupings.

REFERENCES


