

The narratives of Asians amidst the Covid-19 pandemic in Aotearoa New Zealand: Navigating a virtual realm in the context of anti-Asian racism

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: The Asian population, the third largest ethnic group in Aotearoa New Zealand, confronts persistent socio-economic exclusion exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic amidst rising anti-Asian racism. The study aims to explore Asians' pandemic experiences and their impact on their quality of life in Aotearoa New Zealand, with the goal of contributing to tailored knowledge development for Asians in crisis situations.

METHODS: The study, theoretically grounded in symbolic interactionism, examines stories of 26 Asians representing Chinese, Indian, Filipino and Korean communities. Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews identifies patterns encapsulating participants' strategies to sustain their lives and challenges faced during the pandemic.

FINDINGS: The Covid-19 pandemic profoundly disrupts participants' lives, evoking anxiety and uncertainty. In response, they turned to virtual realms to maintain daily routines and connections with their home countries. They often relied on ethnic communities for support due to difficulties in accessing formal support systems. Notably, North-east Asians face adversity from racism targeting individuals with a Chinese appearance, resulting in reduced self-esteem and weakened societal belonging.

CONCLUSION: The study sheds light on challenges Asians face amidst escalating anti-Asian racism and highlights the crucial role of ethnic social services during the pandemic. Social workers must engage with ethnic communities, partnering with ethnic social services, to address Asians' needs in times of crisis.

Keywords: Asians; anti-Asian racism; ethnic social services; symbolic interactionism; virtual realm

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The Covid-19 pandemic impacted various dimensions of citizens' lives in Aotearoa New Zealand. This sweeping influence extends to both individuals and society at large, fostering heightened uncertainty (Cochrane, 2021). Notably, the pandemic's ramifications have been particularly profound for the Asian community in Aotearoa New Zealand, facing formidable

challenges in accessing healthcare and government support due to language barriers and limited social networks, instilling anxiety and confusion (Ministry of Health, 2020).

Furthermore, this already challenging situation is compounded by a rise in Covid-19-related anti-Asian racism (Jaung et al., 2022).

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Amidst mounting anxieties about the spread of Covid-19, there has been a surge in discrimination, physical violence, and harassment against Asians (Gover et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2022). This escalation of discriminatory experiences amidst heightened anxiety and uncertainty poses a pressing challenge for the well-being and health of Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand (Siegert et al., 2023).

This article, theoretically grounded in symbolic interactionism, explores Asians' experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand during the pandemic, highlighting their unique challenges. It reviews Asians' life issues, underlining the research gap on their pandemic circumstances. This is followed by the study's methodology. Findings encapsulate Asians' strategies for sustaining their lives and the challenges they faced throughout the pandemic. The final section discusses the role of ethnic social services in crises for Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand

The term *Asians* encompasses an inclusive category, reflecting "differences in geographical, political, cultural, religious, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds" (Jaung et al., 2022, p. 61). This diversity highlights the multiple dimensions within Asian communities (Ho, 2015), making a comprehensive understanding of Asians as a whole in Aotearoa New Zealand nearly impossible (Kim, 2021). According to the 2018 Census, 707,598 Asians resided in Aotearoa, constituting the third-largest ethnic group, accounting for 15.1% of the total population, after European (70.2%) and Māori (16.5%) (Statistics New Zealand, 2018). Among Asians, the largest sub-ethnic groups were Chinese (247,770), Indian (239,193), Filipino (72,612), and Korean (35,664).

The significant presence of Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand began in the late 1980s when the government abolished racial preferences in immigration policy (Cheyne et al., 2008). Prior to this policy shift, the Asian population

was negligible, less than 1% in 1986, with Europeans comprising 87% and Māori 9% (Jackson & McRobie, 2005). Since then, the influx of Asian immigrants has reshaped Aotearoa New Zealand's demographic landscape from primary bicultural to ethnic diverse (Kim & Hocking, 2018). Notably, the majority of Asians residing in Aotearoa New Zealand arrived within the past three decades, despite historical records dating back to the early 1800s (King, 2003).

In response to ethnic diversity in society, efforts have been made to build an inclusive society where citizens fully participate, irrespective of racial and cultural backgrounds, while still maintaining their connection with their cultural origins (Nayar, 2013). Initiatives like the New Zealand Settlement Strategy of 2004, alongside regional settlement strategies, promote mutual respect for diversity (Department of Labour, 2004). The establishment of the Ministry for Ethnic Communities in 2021 further amplifies ethnic voices (Ministry of Ethnic Communities, n.d.). The government's focus has shifted from mere importation to integrating individuals into society while celebrating their traditions as integral components of daily life in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The government recognises the importance of integrating ethnic minority people for social cohesion (Ho et al., 2000), promoting their full participation through measures such as ensuring: 1) they feel welcome and accepted; 2) are suitably employed and housed; 3) understand New Zealand English; 4) have access to information and services; and 5) comprehend Aotearoa New Zealand's way of life (Department of Labour, 2007). Accordingly, settlement services have been established nationwide to address Asians' societal needs, supporting self-help groups (Nash, 2005). For instance, Settlement Support New Zealand, an Immigration New Zealand initiative, offers clear contact points through 18 nationwide offices (Immigration New Zealand,

2014). Local initiatives like Asian Family Services (AFS, www.asianfamilyservices.nz), Chinese New Settlers Services Trust (CNSST, www.cnsst.org.nz) and The Asian Network Inc (TANI, www.asiannetwork.org.nz) provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services, fostering a sense of belonging among Asians with workshops on understanding Aotearoa's practices.

The government's shift in response to ethnic diversity, alongside concerted efforts by ethnic social services, has yielded positive outcomes. High Asian life satisfaction levels, including key determinants such as good health, stable employment, income security, and positive family and social relationship (Ministry of Social Development, n.d.), stand at 86.5% (Asian Family Services, 2021), reflecting notable success across various social facets. This success extends to the recent election of Asians to Parliament in 2023. Societal efforts to facilitate Asians' success, coupled with the growing recognition of their contributions to society (Asia New Zealand Foundation, 2021), enhance Asians' participation in the broader societal framework, crucial for promoting diversity in society.

Asians' life issues in Aotearoa

However, concerns persist regarding the exclusion and marginalisation of Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand, despite the positive outcomes of their societal participation. Studies highlight acculturation complexities, exacerbated by barriers like discrimination, racism, and limited social networks (Cheyne et al., 2008; Ho, 2015; Park et al., 2023; Wright-St Clair et al., 2018). Settling in Aotearoa New Zealand poses a stressful transition, influenced by both domestic and societal factors, leading to various acculturative stressors (Lee & Keown, 2018). This includes adapting to new cultural norms, losing their mother language, and re-establishing support systems while preserving heritage connections (Nayar, 2013). From this perspective, settling in Aotearoa New Zealand entails internal and external conflicts,

alienation, and grief over losses (Pepworth & Nash, 2009), constraining their societal participation (Kim & Hocking, 2018).

Notably, the experiences of Asians occur within social contexts where they encounter "racism in variegated ways" (Ang et al., 2023, p. 3). Racism manifests as a structured power system where targeted racial groups face persistent denial of belonging and unequal treatment across social domains (Gover et al., 2020). Particularly in Aotearoa, New Zealand "racism is linked to the history of colonisation and ongoing coloniality" (Park et al., 2023, p. 96), necessitating discussion of racism against Asians within this historical framework. Historically, until the 1980s, immigration policy aimed at maintaining a predominantly white population (Bedford et al., 2010), implementing racially motivated immigration policies to uphold British-ness (Spoonley, 1993). This led to a collective culture of whiteness in Aotearoa New Zealand (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2021), marginalising Asians as sojourner communities (Kim, 2021). Consequently, Asians, whose appearance and behaviours deviate from dominant white social norms, are often stigmatised as potential threats to social cohesion (Cheyne et al., 2008).

This stigmatisation persists today (Park et al., 2023), with Asians identified as the most discriminated-against group in 2016 (Ministry of Social Development, 2016). Despite a facade of racial harmony (Duncan, 2007), Asians consistently report anti-Asian sentiment involving verbal harassment and physical violence (Chiang, 2021). Furthermore, historically entrenched ethnic inequality perpetuate barriers to full societal participation (Ng, 2017), including a lack of belonging (Butcher & Wieland, 2013), racial income gaps (Anthony, 2015), limited access to public and health services (Peiris-John et al., 2022; Wright-St Clair et al., 2018), and denial of full membership in society (Kale et al., 2018). Troubling statistics indicate that 23% of Asian immigrants seldom socialise with other New Zealanders (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment 2015),

with 44.4% of Asians exhibiting symptoms of depression, rising to 61.3% among younger Asians (Asian Family Services, 2021).

Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand have historically endured challenges in rebuilding their lives and negotiating ethnic identities, often confronting societal prejudice. This pervasive inequality was further highlighted during the Covid-19 pandemic, with Asians encountering limited social and psychological resources (Ministry of Health, 2020). Language barriers and constrained social networks hindered their access to healthcare and government support. Simultaneously, many Asians reported Covid-related harassment and racism (Human Rights Commission, 2021; Jaung et al., 2022), amidst what has been described as “the governments’ Covid-19 rhetoric and mainstream media’s racist sentiment and comments” (Liu et al., 2022, p. 2). Several studies documented incidents of Covid-19-induced anti-Asian racism, particularly through cross-cultural surveys, with many highlighting discriminatory practices against Asians, leading to decreased life satisfaction and weakened belonging (Ang et al., 2023; Jaung et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2022; Park et al., 2023; Siegert et al., 2023).

The Covid-19 pandemic significantly impacts the health and wellbeing of Asians, who often face barriers accessing benefits of an inclusive society, primarily due to their status as Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand (Kim & Hocking, 2018). Questions arise on how Asians navigate daily life amidst heightened uncertainty and anti-Asian sentiments. This study aims to explore Asians’ experiences during the pandemic and its impact on their quality of life. By examining their experiences in this context, it seeks to contribute to tailored knowledge development for Asians during crises, informing society on promoting their full participation in Aotearoa New Zealand. Key research questions include:

1. How do Asians maintain daily routines in main social domains; self-care, work, and leisure, during Covid-19?
2. What challenges do Asians face in maintaining daily routines amidst Covid-19?
3. How do Asians respond to Covid-19-induced challenges, including the support they seek or desire?
4. How do Covid-19-related challenges affect the quality of life for Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand?

Methodology

Theoretically grounded in symbolic interactionism, this study posits that individuals’ experiences result from social interactions rather than inherent traits (Blumer, 1969). Symbolic interactionism emphasises the process of social interaction in constructing meanings of experiential realities, whereby individuals engage with objects in their environment. This theoretical perspective suggests that meanings are contingent on individuals’ interpretation of objects, derived from social interactions (Crotty, 1998), highlighting the existence of diverse meanings within the same phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

From this viewpoint, Asians construct their reality through interpretive processes. This study explores Asians’ reality in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, examining their experiential narratives within complex social interactions (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Such an approach aligns with the researchers’ positionality as immigrants, offering an insider’s view of diverse experiences in integration, and as social work researchers, emphasising the inseparable relationship between individuals and their contexts. This positionality advocates for social change and promotes future research on ambiguously defined problems by disseminating collected narratives. This study received ethical approval by Massey University in 2021 (ref. SOB 21 / 52).

Participants

The study's participant criteria involved Asians aged 20 years and above, residing in Aotearoa New Zealand for over 5 years, and present during the Covid-19 pandemic. Employing purposive sampling (Victor, 2006), the study recruited individuals meeting these criteria, possessing relevant experiences to address the research questions, and thereby offering valuable insights into Asians' pandemic experiences. Participants included individuals of Chinese, Indian, Filipino, and Korean descent, reflecting their significant presence in Aotearoa's Asian demographic (Statistics New Zealand, n.d.).

Research assistants were enlisted for the Chinese, Indian and Filipino communities and underwent a one-hour introductory session, receiving a comprehensive study overview and consenting to a confidential agreement. Adhering to participant criteria, these assistants circulated study information within their networks, ensuring voluntary participation. Interested individuals received information sheets and consent forms in their preferred languages (Chinese, Hindi, Filipino, Korean, and English), developed in consultation with research assistants and co-researchers, highlighting confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any point. Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred languages, with research assistants providing translations as necessary.

Between February and November 2022, 26 participants aged 31-85 were interviewed during the Covid-19 pandemic. The majority were interviewed online, except for those with Korean participants, which were in person. Participants included seven Chinese, six Indian, six Filipino, and seven Korean individuals, all born overseas and residing in Aotearoa for 5-27 years (average 15.2 years). Ten were male, and the rest were female. Geographically, most resided in Auckland, with three exceptions living in Hamilton, the Marlborough District, and Tauranga. Employment varied: one university student,

two housewives, two retirees, 18 employed, and three self-employed. Pseudonyms ensured confidentiality. Table 1 presents their demographic characteristics.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source, enabling participants to share comprehensive insights while the researcher guided the interview process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Using open-ended questions, the study allowed participants to narrate their stories in detail. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and then translated into English for analysis, with assistance from research assistants.

Data analysis

This study employed thematic analysis, a method for identifying patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By offering insight into recurring patterns found within the dataset, this approach aims to reveal the meanings participants attribute to their experiences, aligning with symbolic interactionism's view on multiple perspectives on phenomena arising from social interactions (Blumer, 1969). Essentially, thematic analysis facilitates the development of cohesive themes representing meanings participants assign to their experiences (Roberts et al., 2019). The data analysis process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide: 'familiarisation with data,' 'coding,' 'searching for themes,' 'reviewing theme,' 'defining and naming themes,' and 'writing up'.

Initial data familiarisation involved thoroughly examining participants' narratives. Subsequently, researchers generated initial codes to capture semantic and conceptual nuances in the data, forming the foundation for theme development (Roberts et al., 2019). These codes, along with relevant data excerpts, were aggregated to identify meaningful themes addressing research questions. Themes underwent

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Characteristics

Name	Gender	Age	Marital status	No. Children	Arrival in Aotearoa	Employment status	City of residence
CP1	Female	40	Married	2	1995	Employed	Auckland
CP2	Female	55	Married	1	2010	Student	Auckland
CP3	Female	42	Married	2	2000	Employed	Auckland
CP4	Male	43	Married	2	2002	Employed	Auckland
CP5	Female	45	Married	2	2006	Housewife	Auckland
CP6	Female	41	Married	2	2017	Self-Employed	Auckland
CP7	Female	36	Single	0	2013	Employed	Auckland
IP1	Male	38	Married	0	2008	Employed	Auckland
IP2	Male	40	Married	1	2006	Self-employed	Auckland
IP3	Female	62	Married	3	1998	Housewife	Auckland
IP4	Female	62	Married	1	2002	Employed	Auckland
IP5	Male	40	Married	2	2014	Employed	Marlborough District
IP6	Male	85	Married	0 in care	1999	Retired	Auckland
FP1	Male	32	Single	0	2012	Employed	Auckland
FP2	Female	44	Married	4	2011	Employed	Auckland
FP3	Female	31	Married	1	2016	Employed	Auckland
FP4	Female	34	Single	0	2012	Employed	Auckland
FP5	Male	73	Married	3	2003	Retired	Auckland
FP6	Male	40	Married	1	2011	Employed	Auckland
KP1	Female	47	Single	0	2004	Self-employed	Auckland
KP2	Female	55	Married	2	2010	Employed	Auckland
KP3	Male	50	Married	2	2000	Employed	Auckland
KP4	Male	50	Married	2	2000	Employed	Hamilton
KP5	Female	40	Married	2	2007	Employed	Auckland
KP6	Female	41	Married	1	2009	Employed	Auckland
KP7	Female	64	Married	3	2000	Employed	Tauranga

(CP– Chinese, IP– Indian, FP– Filipino and KP– Korean)

further refinement, considering coherence, relevance, and distinctiveness. Each theme's nature was defined by evaluating relationships between them. During this phase, significant themes were clearly defined, with key attributes identified, and concise and informative names assigned. Lastly, researchers constructed a persuasive narrative by integrating themes with relevant excerpts.

Notably, the six-phase data analysis process is recursive (Braun & Clarke, 2012), with researchers frequently moving back and forth until reaching theoretical saturation, where "additional new data will not add new understanding to the question at hand" (Thai et al., 2012, p. 5). This iterative approach fosters conceptualisation of data, culminating in thematic constructs and their interpretation within research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

The study's participants disclosed that the onset of Covid-19 pandemic precipitated profound disruptions to their established routines. They also expressed increased anxiety about an uncertain future due to the rise of Covid-19-related anti-Asian racism, particularly targeting individuals of North-east Asian origin, undermining their self-esteem and sense of belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand. Four significant themes emerged: 'turbulence in equilibrium,' 'the normalisation of abnormality,' 'navigating a virtual realm' and 'anti-Asian racism targeting individuals with a Chinese appearance.'

According to symbolic interactionism, the meaning of objects stems from social interactions, yet individuals often modify these meanings when encountering phenomena (Blumer, 1969). This implies that "both society and person are abstractions from on-going social interaction" (Stryker, 1980, p. 2), locating themes at micro/meso/macro levels. The micro-level theme, 'the normalisation of abnormality', the meso-level

theme, 'navigating a virtual realm', and the macro-level theme, 'anti-Asian racism targeting individuals with a Chinese appearance', collectively depict participants' varied experiences within the broader social context during the Covid-19 pandemic. Use of 'In-vivo codes,' extracted from participants' comments (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), conveyed their perspectives on their lived experiences.

Turbulence in equilibrium

Aotearoa New Zealand is globally renowned for its clean and peaceful environment, a perception that resonates with individuals from overseas, "I thought New Zealand was a peaceful country" (IP4). Many participants in this study shared this positive image before relocating to Aotearoa, harbouring optimistic expectations for their new life, "I was looking for better opportunities for my family" (FP1). However, the immigration process, characterised as transitioning from one social unit into another (Kim & Hocking, 2018), presents a series of acculturative challenges, severely disrupting participants' daily routines and creating hardships.

Upon arrival, many participants faced arduous situations while adjusting to their lives in Aotearoa New Zealand, primarily due to their newly arrival and ethnic minority status. They grappled with challenges related to limited social networks, "Here, we were alone, me and my family" (IP5), language barriers, "English is my second language. There were lots of difficulties in communicating with others" (CP2), unfamiliar culture, "It was a shock when I came here because of the cultural differences" (IP4) and unrecognised life experience and qualifications, "No one recognised my qualification. I had to start a job picking fruit" (KP1), which complicated their adjustment process in Aotearoa New Zealand.

This multifaceted experience often left Asian immigrants facing hardship, "For the first few years, it was emotionally and physically

challenging" (KP2), as they grappled with losses related to their accustomed daily routines, roles, and resources, "It was a tough time for me to get a job. Despite all my qualifications, I had to start as a cook" (IP5). Discrimination and racism further compounded their challenges, "People treated us with a different standard" (CP2), making it difficult for them to engage in essential daily activities, leading to financial hardships; "We had to survive with the money we brought from India" (IP5), social isolation, "I didn't have any connections with local people" (KP1); and acceptance of their minority status in the host society, "As an Asian, I feel left out in this country even though I pay taxes and work hard to feed my family. We are being ignored till today" (IP2).

In response to these challenges, participants exhibited resilience and determination in rebuilding their lives in Aotearoa New Zealand. They were willing to adopt heavy work schedules, "I worked seven days a week" (KP4). Moreover, they employed various coping strategies, such as accepting jobs beneath their qualifications, "I worked at an aged care village despite having 17-years of nursing experience" (CP2); seeking support from ethnic communities, "There are always Indian communities, and you can connect with them" (IP5). In some cases, they deliberately distanced themselves from their ethnic background: "To learn about New Zealand society, I didn't meet other Koreans" (KP1). In adapting to a new environment, participants employed coping strategies that often resulted in emotional distress, "While distancing myself from my ethnic community, I felt intense loneliness" (KP1), and claimed a physical toll.

I was a teacher in India. But here I worked picking strawberries and all sorts of that kind. I'm not saying it is bad because every job is important, but I didn't have a physical work background, so it was hard. (IP4)

Over time, the participants' persistent efforts allowed them to gradually adapt to their new

surroundings. They became familiar with the local community, leading to a growing sense of security in their lives within Aotearoa New Zealand, "After a few years of struggles, my life is now secured. I have a decent job and know the community where I live" (KP3). They achieved a balanced life between their home and host country, "I felt my life is now balanced, I know locals and also people from the Korean community" (KP1). This equilibrium inspired them to integrate into the host society, "I wanted to mingle with local people, so I know how the culture and system in NZ works" (CP2); and set life goals, "My husband has a secure job and I had a plan for myself" (KP2); with increased life satisfaction, "I am thankful to God that we got this opportunity to live in NZ because my family has a good life here" (FP5).

From this perspective, the theme of 'turbulence in equilibrium' encapsulates the disruption caused by the pandemic to the balanced lives participants had gradually achieved, "Oh my lord, I thought we were finally settled. I hoped everything would be better from now on but then the Covid outbreak occurred" (KP7). After a period of endurance, many participants began to embrace the benefits of living in Aotearoa New Zealand, "I enjoy living in New Zealand. The environment, air quality and the living standards are much better than my home country" (CP1). However, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic severely disrupted the equilibrium they had achieved in Aotearoa New Zealand, leading them to an uncertain future again.

Before Covid, I was happy about my life. People were friendly, casual, and liked to talk to others. I also enjoyed travelling, visiting friends in Queenstown ... However, the pandemic has limited my ability to interact with people, and everything changed. (CP7)

The uncertainty and stringent measures implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted participants' daily routines,

highlighting the challenges in maintaining pre-pandemic activities, since “Everyone should stay home” (CP1). These restrictive measures served to isolate participants from broader society; “The big challenge I experienced was I couldn’t meet people. How dare I visited people when they said no to come” (KP1), underscoring the pronounced social isolation imposed by the pandemic. Furthermore, participants expressed a sense of estrangement from their countries of origin, “I can’t visit my family in Philippine because I am stuck in New Zealand” (FP1), indicating the emotional strain resulting from geographical separation.

Specifically, concerns about job security, gained through considerable endeavour, “I had worked in various roles, such as a concierge, farmer, ... and recently as a support worker” (FP6), were prevalent among participants. “My husband got lots of stress without work for months” (KP5). Such anxiety was compounded for self-employed individuals, “A lot of Asians had small businesses. They struggled badly because of restrictions” (IP5) and “I witnessed a dramatic decrease in customers to my shop” (KP7). Consequently, the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the equilibrium participants had gradually achieved in various aspects of their lives, fostering feelings of powerlessness; “There is nothing we can do but just to follow the government rules” (FP4). Heightened stress and anxiety about an uncertain future permeated participants’ narratives during the pandemic, “I didn’t know how long this pandemic would last. When can I see my parents back home? It made me cry” (KP2). In this sense, the Covid-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted participants’ lives in Aotearoa New Zealand, “The pandemic? It broke my lifestyle rather than shaking it” (KP4).

The normalisation of abnormality

The theme of ‘the normalisation of abnormality’ illustrates how the

unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic “It would be a historical event for our next generation” (KP4), transformed what was once considered abnormal into the new normal. In early 2020, the outbreak of Covid-19, with limited knowledge about the virus, “There was not much news. I only knew that once you caught the virus, it could be fatal” (CP7), triggered panic in Aotearoa New Zealand with widespread anxiety, “There was no planning because nobody knew about it” (IP3). Panic buying and stockpiling of essential items became common: “At the beginning, many people rushed to the supermarket and queuing up to stock up on items” (CP2).

With the first confirmed case in Aotearoa New Zealand in January 2020, the government declared a State of National Emergency on May 2020, and implemented various restrictive measures, including mask-wearing, travel restrictions, social distancing, testing, contact tracing, and lockdown, “During the Covid period, all social activities were abandoned and forbidden” (CP1), while still engaging in essential activities. Vaccination and hygiene promotion were also integral to the strategy: “Our normal routine has changed, additional hygiene steps have been added to avoid Covid infection” (FP1), and what was once considered routine in civic society gave way to a new set of norms, “The restriction becomes the new normal as they call it now” (IP3) and the public gradually accepted this abnormality as their new normalcy, “We can’t go anywhere without showing vaccination card” (FP5).

Lockdown, in particular, profoundly impacted participants’ lives, with most services suddenly closing: “Suddenly everything closed” (IP2). Fear of the virus heightened unease about social interactions, as “People were worried about contact with each other” (CP7). The closure of services further exacerbated the disruption, “In lockdown, I couldn’t access treatment or supported services” (CP4). Participants had

to relinquish many activities they once enjoyed freely, and now “You cannot do all the normal things that you do before the pandemic” (FP5). While some adapted with discomfort, “It was a little uncomfortable as I had to queue when I shopped” (KP3); others felt frustration and anxiety, “Having no work for months made me worry all the time, questions like; what now, what’s going to happen, are we going to be okay?” (FP6), compounded by fear of future uncertainty, “We got worried what will happen next?” (IP4).

While the normalisation of abnormality during the pandemic appeared to impact all Aotearoa New Zealand residents, it posed additional challenges for participants, particularly for those lacking extended family networks, “During the pandemic, only my wife and I lived here. No family support available” (IP5). This was especially pronounced for participants living alone, where the potential fatality of Covid-19 heightened anxiety, “I may die tomorrow because of the virus. In this case, what will happen? I don’t have any family here. It triggered my anxiety” (KP1). Moreover, international travel restrictions prevented visits to families in home countries: “There were many travel restrictions. I haven’t visited my parents in Hong Kong in the last two years” (CP3). This separation from loved ones carried feelings of guilt and emotional exhaustion: “I felt sorry to my parents in Korea. Am I doing enough for them as a daughter?” (KP2), particularly during times of sickness and death within the family, “During the lockdown, my father-in-law passed away. We couldn’t go back to the Philippines and watched the funeral online. It was hard for my husband” (FP2).

The transformation of what was once considered normal into a new reality of restrictions and uncertainty, “I stayed at home all the time, for almost two years” (FP5), resulting in varying degrees of emotional toll. Uncertainty, coupled with feelings of loneliness, was widespread

among participants: “My friend lived alone here. She said staying home for 24 hours was very lonely with no one around” (CP2). Moreover, participants experienced a sense of guilt for not being physically present during significant family occasions in their home countries, “Filipinos are known to be family oriented. I felt sorry and sad that I couldn’t be present during big occasions” (FP1). This sense of disconnection was further compounded by decreased confidence in living in Aotearoa New Zealand, “Honestly, I lost my confidence in New Zealand. Here you never know what will happen in the future” (CP5), leading to doubts about their post-retirement plans, “The Covid-19 made me rethink where I’ll live after retirement, since my future in New Zealand seemed uncertain” (KP2).

Navigating a virtual realm

In the face of strict pandemic-related restrictions curtailing physical interactions and mobility, participants, such as CP5: “I only stayed home. I was cautious about the virus,” had to seek alternative means to engage in essential activities. The theme of ‘navigating a virtual realm’ encapsulated their adaptation to these challenges. In this study, participants predominantly turned to virtual platforms, where they could continue nearly all aspects of their social lives, “I used all possible IT gadgets, such as Zoom and Microsoft teams” (FP1). This reliance extended to communication with the outside world, “Social media was our way to communicate. We updated each other through social media and online chats” (FP2), particularly in maintaining connections with loved ones in their home countries; “I spent most of my day online talking to my parents in South Korea” (KP3).

This extensive online engagement encompassed various activities essential for daily life maintenance, such as shopping, “I mainly did online shopping” (CP1). It also extended to productivity-related pursuits, like “I worked from home and attended

Zoom meetings" (KP2) and transitioning to online learning, "My study switched to online" (CP2). Moreover, these online adaptations included activities of personal significance, such as attending religious services, "We attended church online" (FP6); and leisure activities, "I wouldn't survive without You Tube" (KP4). In this study, participants immersed themselves in the virtual world across almost all aspects of their social lives, while still maintaining a necessary level of physical activity and in-person interactions, "We only went for a walk nearby" (FP2), recognising the limitations of online alternatives. "I'm Chinese. I had to buy some Chinese stuff such as Chinese noodles and rice, which were only available from Chinese grocery shops, not online" (CP1).

However, not all participants readily embraced this digital world for daily life sustenance. As articulated by IP4, "I never ever used Zoom before. Before Covid, I didn't even know Zoom existed." Furthermore, despite their efforts to adapt to the digital world, "I learnt to use those technologies with my family's help" (FP5), participants encountered several limitations associated with no in-person interaction, "Online church services were often disrupted. I turned on Zoom but often did something else" (KP2); and "Meeting classmates online can't replace real presence. I felt a sense of distance from them" (KP5). Additionally, participants for whom English was as a second language found, "Online sessions are much harder to understand" (KP6) than face-to-face interactions.

Significantly, participants with young children faced increased pressure in the domestic sphere, especially due to homeschooling during lockdown, "I have two children. I had to be their teacher and mother, taking on various responsibilities" (CP5). While adults sought ways to occupy their time: "I read books. It helped me spend time and kept my mind busy" (FP5), parents struggled to structure their children's time at home, since "My children were a

bit bored because they couldn't go out" (FP2). To manage family time, participants employed various strategies, such as having "A family movie night" (FP6) and "Cooking together" (KP3). However, it seemed to be inevitable that extended periods at home led to domestic conflicts, with KP1 observing, "There was no space for me", exacerbated by increased parental responsibilities, "For me, it was challenging because I worked from home and had to assist my children with their studies ... This was an added workload that became too much for me" (FP2).

In line with this parental challenge, female participants faced increased strain, particularly in patriarchal cultures, where traditional gender roles persisted, "It was hard for many Indian ladies, as they faced the male-dominant culture. Women were expected to manage all household chores, while men often didn't do anything" (IP5). While many Asian couples shared domestic duties, "I normally prepared meals because my wife worked from home" (KP4), instances of entrenched patriarchal norms persisted, with women primarily assuming domestic roles, as illustrated by KP5: "My husband did nothing. I had to prepare all meals and play with children. He contributed very little, virtually none ... This made me feel crazy."

As participants navigated virtual realms to sustain their lives during the pandemic, the increased time spent at home necessitated the creation of activities to pass the time. For parents with young children, this posed an additional challenge, "We have a 2-year-old child and a baby. Looking after them made us very exhausted" (CP4). Particularly in patriarchal domestic cultures, female participants shouldered the majority of domestic responsibilities, taking an emotional toll, as shared by CP3:

Homeschooling was challenging. My son struggled to follow it, so I had to assist him by sitting close and helping him complete his homework ... As a mother, this placed a heavy burden on me, and I experienced depression as a result.

Anti-Asian racism targeting individuals with a Chinese appearance

Incidents of anti-Asian racism are regrettably not infrequent in Aotearoa New Zealand, despite its reputation for racial harmony. The prevalence of anti-Asian racism is evident, even before Covid-19, as one participant reported, "People called my husband a yellow monkey at work" (KP5). In this study, participants commonly expressed frustration upon encountering racism, "They ignored me because I am Asian" (KP7), which often manifested covertly.

In New Zealand, it is hard to report such incidents because they often occur covertly. People may not explicitly state, "you are brown, and I don't want to associate with you" ... But many don't even want to have a lunch with me. (IP5)

The Covid-19 pandemic worsened anti-Asian racism in Aotearoa New Zealand. This rise was particularly pronounced among individuals with a Chinese appearance due to the widespread assumption that "Covid originated from China" (CP1).

A surge in Covid-19-induced anti-Asian racism occurred during a period marked by public fear and frustration, as "A way to release their pent-up frustration, and I was chosen simply because I am Asian" (KP7). The theme of 'Anti-Asian racism targeting individuals with a Chinese appearance' encapsulates the experiences of racism among Asians during the pandemic, primarily affecting Chinese people, but also extending to individuals from North-east Asia. This is because, "People don't distinguish whether we are Korean or Chinese. We look quite similar" (KP5). Participants with a Chinese appearance reported various forms of anti-Asian racism, including behaviours like social distancing, differential attitudes, and even expressions of racial prejudice that could escalate to life-threatening situations, "I had seen my Chinese friend, especially in the beginning of the pandemic, he was walking, and people were swearing at him" (IP1).

Throughout the pandemic, a substantial volume of unofficial information circulated regarding the virus's origin, often insinuating that "Covid first appeared in China" (CP7). Consequently, the public's responses towards Asians with a Chinese appearance displayed a broad spectrum, characterised by instances of physical distance and discriminatory behaviours. For example, "People stared at us as if we were carriers of the virus" (KP5). Verbal confrontations were not uncommon, instructing participants to keep their distance, such as "When I went for a walk, a woman yelled at me saying to stay away from her" (KP1), or go back to their countries, "People said Chinese brought the virus, so go back to their country. I also saw similar comments on Facebook" (FP3). Additionally, prejudiced attitudes were evident, as described by CP6: "He told me not to be outside. He saw me yellow, and assumed I might have the virus." KP3 recounted a similar experience, citing differential treatment based on his Asian ethnic status:

A man reproached me for not wearing a mask at the park, despite it not being mandatory at the time. I didn't want to cause any trouble, so I donned a mask. However, in a similar situation later on, he didn't admonish a European passerby.

It is important to emphasise that these incidents do not represent the entirety of Aotearoa's response during the pandemic, where the majority of people were described as "kind and friendly" (CP2). However, it is noteworthy that some individuals expressed their prejudices covertly, while others resorted to verbal abuse, such as instructing Asians with a Chinese appearance to "Go back to China" (KP6) or engaging in racial harassment: "Our shop is next to a Chinese takeaway. I saw several people racially abusing them, telling them to return to China" (IP2). In certain instances, these hostilities escalated to physical threats directed at Asians with a Chinese

appearance, as “Someone threw a bottle at one of my Japanese friends and told her to go back to her country” (KP5).

As such, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated various forms of anti-Asian racism, primarily targeting Chinese individuals and extending to people from North-east Asia due to perceived racial similarities. Conversely, individuals from South-east Asia have relatively been exempt from this Covid-19-fueled, anti-Asian racism, “I haven’t experienced any discrimination” (FP3) and “Not in my case” (IP1). This disparity in experiences can be attributed to their differing racial statuses, despite being collectively labelled as Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand. This underscores the reality that individuals from different Asian countries have distinct experiences shaped by their ethnic and social status in society, “I didn’t experience racism during the pandemic because my Filipino features are not Asiatic” (FP1).

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought severe disruptions to citizens’ lives, leading to heightened anxiety, “At the beginning, we were all anxious about the virus” (KP7). These stressful situations were exacerbated when Asians with a Chinese appearance confronted Covid-19-induced, anti-Asian racism, adversely impacting their self-esteem and overall quality of life in Aotearoa New Zealand, “People were not nice to Chinese people ... People looked at us differently. I felt weird making eye contact when outside in public, as it made me uncomfortable” (CP7). In response to Covid-specific, anti-Asian racism, most participants opted to ignore or avoid the situation rather than confront it directly, “I tried to keep a low profile ... I avoided people because I didn’t want them to point at me and talk about China” (CP2). Particularly among those from North-east Asia, there was a conscious effort to limit public encounters, “I tried not to go outside” (KP5), while ignoring the incidents like this, “When a guy showed me his finger, I didn’t do anything. I didn’t want to ruin my day because of that guy” (KP2). Some participants

deliberately disclosed their country of origin to circumvent racism targeting individuals with a Chinese appearance, “We hang the Korean flag at the shop, so people know we are not Chinese” (KP7).

Whether participants consciously concealed their ethnic identity and responded passively to incidents of Covid-19-related, anti-Asian racism, “A lady looked at me, saying ‘don’t touch the vegetables’ ... I tried to explain but later apologise and leave the shop” (CP7), with some exceptions of confrontation, “When she said stay away from me, I swore her back” (KP1); the experiences of anti-Asian racism undeniably impacted their quality of life in Aotearoa New Zealand. Some hesitated to reveal their ethnic identity, “At the supermarket, I tried to cover myself, as a Chinese” (CP2), leading to the development of low self-esteem, “I felt intimidated by my Asian status” (KP5), ultimately leading to the realisation of their ethnic minority status in society: “I’ve been here for the last 19 years, and that experience made me realise I am an ethnic minority” (KP1). This study highlights how participants interpret Covid-19-induced, anti-Asian racism depending on their ethnic and social status in society, which, in turn, is closely related to their sense of belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand.

I am Chinese and married to a Kiwi husband. When I saw my husband’s relatives’ comments on Facebook about Covid-19, I could tell they discriminated against Chinese people ... Reading their comments made me feel sad, and I began to wonder who I am here and to them. (CP5)

Discussion

This study examines Asians’ experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic, with a particular emphasis on addressing their specific needs during crises and promoting their participation in Aotearoa New Zealand. Subsequently, the discussion focuses on how Asians respond to Covid-19-induced

challenges and the support they seek, aligning with social work objectives of empowerment and societal change (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 2019).

Since the onset of Covid-19 pandemic, Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand have faced challenges due to limited knowledge, support, and resources (Ministry of Health, 2020), compounded by societal prejudice and anti-Asian racism (Liu et al., 2022). Many Asians encountered difficulties accessing formal support systems and turned to informal networks for assistance, such as family, friends, and religious groups, "My parents couldn't go shopping for groceries. Their friends shopped for them" (CP1). This informal support, like the food bank organised by IP5 through his ethnic church to assist struggling immigrants, proved crucial during the pandemic.

People reached out to me for help. So, I collaborated with fellow church members to organise a food bank. We delivered food parcels to people in need. I know many immigrants struggled but couldn't get help from the government.

The Covid-19 pandemic induced significant stress and anxiety, with initial uncertainty leading many people to a state of panic, "In the early days, lots of people didn't know what to do and started panicking" (IP1). While many citizens accessed government support, "When I got redundant, I applied for wage subsidy" (FP6), others, particularly Asians, confronted challenges accessing formal support due to limited local knowledge (Koh et al., 2023). Notably, language barriers and the absence of local networks compounded these difficulties, "English is not my first language. I could not fully understand the Covid updates" (CP7). Consequently, they often relied on informal networks for assistance. From this perspective, Asians faced specific risks and consequences owing to their ethnic minority status, which hindered their access to government resources during the pandemic

and increased their estrangement from the host society.

Furthermore, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Asians' experiences contained persistent anti-Asian racism, as evidenced by multiple studies (Ang et al., 2023; Jaung et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2022; Park et al., 2023; Siegert et al., 2023), with many Asians reporting incidents of Covid-19-induced harassment and violence (Foon, 2020; Human Rights Commission, 2021). These incidents limited their societal participation, as they continued to face scrutiny based on societal attitudes. For instance, one participant recounted feeling targeted outside during the pandemic, stating, "People were not nice to us ... People looked at Chinese people differently" (CP7). Such encounters influenced participants' self-perception, aligning with symbolic interactionism, which posits that individuals' selves are shaped by social interaction (Blumer, 1969), resulting in a heightened awareness of their ethnic minority status in Aotearoa New Zealand: "When a lady yelled at me, saying stay away from her ... that experience made me realise I am an ethnic minority" (KP1).

In supporting Asians during the Covid-19 pandemic, this study highlights the pivotal role of ethnic communities, "My Korean friends cooked and left foods in front of our door. I appreciated their support" (KP5). Ethnic social services served as a vital bridge between Asians and the host community. Participants found the utilisation of these services highly effective in accessing essential resources for crisis management, "After I got Covid, Asian Family Services delivered a food parcel, and I found it helpful" (CP4) and "CNSST runs a food bank. They provide substantial support to Asians" (CP2). These services played a significant role during the pandemic, providing necessary support. Particularly for those experiencing anti-Asian racism, ethnic social services served as a platform for Asians to unite, voice collective concern, and develop strategies to address racism: "I joined Asian Family Services' workshop

where we shared our experience of racism ... We need a place like this, so we raise our concern as a group" (KP1). As such, the role of ethnic social services was crucial in assisting and empowering Asians during the pandemic, highlighting the importance of community-based self-groups and networks.

The wellbeing of the Asian population in Aotearoa New Zealand bears substantial implications for the country's prosperity, where, at the 2018 Census, 15.1% of the population identified as Asian, with a majority having immigrant backgrounds (Ministry of Ethnic Communities, n.d.). Moreover, this demographic is projected to continue growing, with an estimated 42% of Auckland residents identifying as Asian by 2043 (Statistics New Zealand, n.d.). In light of this demographic shift, the government is committed to fostering an inclusive society that nurtures a sense of belonging among all members, irrespective of their racial and cultural backgrounds. This commitment is echoed by the social work practice standards of both ANZASW (2019) and Social Workers Registration Board (2016), which emphasise the inclusive and respectful empowerment of ethnic and cultural groups in society.

Nevertheless, concerns of Asians' social exclusion and marginalisation persist due to historically rooted ethnic inequality (Cheyne et al., 2008; Nayar, 2013), highlighting a disparity between their presence and societal participation (Kale et al., 2018; Lee & Keown, 2018). For many Asians, settling in a foreign country entails a non-normative life transition (Ho, 2015), requiring extensive adaptation. The challenges of this transition are compounded when Asians face anti-Asian racism (Jaung et al., 2022), as affirmed by IP5, "We both have a good job and are financially secure now. But still a lot of time I felt racially discriminated." Experiences of anti-Asian racism in Aotearoa New Zealand often constrain Asians' civic engagement and deny their membership (Ng, 2017; Park et al., 2023), justifying their designation as

"a population of interest for social work" (Kim, 2021, p. 4).

In a civic society, equitable treatment and access to opportunities and resources are essential for all members, regardless of social status, particularly during national crises (Chung & Bemak, 2012). Achieving this for Asians requires establishing a transitional bridge that connects their ethnic community with the host society, leveraging social workers' expertise in strengthening community capacities and resources (Viola et al., 2018). The role of social workers in supporting Asians in addressing transitional life challenges and enhancing social participation is crucial. While empowering them at the micro level, it is imperative to emphasise the importance of partnering with ethnic social services to develop resources and strategies at the meso/macro levels, thereby reinforcing the broader impact of these efforts. This mission aligns with the global definition of social work, which emphasises promoting social change, social cohesion, empowerment, and liberation, guided by principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities (IFSW, n.d.).

Study limitations

This interpretive data analysis introduces bias through inferences (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Despite efforts like back-translation and English validation consultation, differences between the original and translated texts may potentially cause misinterpretation. With only 26 participants from the four largest Asian ethnic groups in metropolitan areas with immigrant backgrounds, findings cannot fully represent all Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand, especially those from other sub-Asian ethnic groups, given the diverse spectrum of the Asian population (Ho, 2015). Future research should replicate this study across various sub-Asian ethnic communities and socio-geographical backgrounds within the Asian community in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Conclusion

Drawing from interviews with 26 Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand, this study unveils their responses to the pandemic's challenges. Participants immersed themselves in virtual realms to maintain routines and connections with home countries. While encountering difficulties in accessing formal support resources due to limited local knowledge, they sought assistance from ethnic communities, highlighting their vital role in times of crisis. This study also highlights challenges faced by Asians, particularly within anti-Asian racism contexts. Amidst Covid-19 stress and anxiety, participants, especially from North-east Asia, experienced racism targeting those with a Chinese appearance, eroding their self-esteem and sense of belonging in the broader community.

This study underscores the need for partnerships with ethnic communities, with a particular emphasis on ethnic social services. These services offer a platform for Asians to access resources and express concerns during crises. It is hoped that this study will raise awareness of the crucial roles of ethnic social services in supporting Asians during crises, contributing to the nation's pandemic responses in the future.

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