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2024 Master's Thesis

Analysis of COVID-19 Vaccine Communication Among Transnational Filipino Families Using  
Family Systems Theory

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# Abstract

The millions of deaths, economic losses, and social disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic led to clamor and eagerness for COVID-19 vaccines at the early stage of the pandemic. However, when COVID-19 vaccines became available, vaccine hesitancy or the delay or refusal to vaccinate despite availability of supply was prevalent. Vaccine hesitancy is not a new phenomenon and has existed even before the pandemic. It was declared a global health threat by the World Health Organization in 2019. Vaccine hesitancy is a decision-making process influenced by several contextual factors. It is critically important to understand these factors as well as analyze vaccine communication processes in order to improve public health.

This research aims to analyze factors influencing vaccine decisions that result in acceptance, hesitancy and rejection. Specifically, I examined the influence of transnational Filipino family communication in vaccine decisions of individual family members.

In Chapter 1, I introduced the COVID-19 global pandemic and the view that vaccines are needed in order to end it. I also summarized the historical context of vaccine success stories and controversies in the world and in the Philippines, followed by previous studies on vaccine hesitancy. These studies have shown that regular approaches to address vaccine hesitancy are lacking and do not target hesitancy itself. These approaches are usually based on knowledge-deficit models that focus on increasing information and awareness and these need to be revised.

In Chapter 2, I summarized frameworks for studying family communication (Galvin, 2016) and transnational caregiving (Baldassar, 2007) as well as the Family Systems Theory. I argued that transnational caregiving is also a form of family communication that is done transnationally. Hence, the transnational communication of vaccines is a form of caregiving from transnational family members and can be analyzed using family communication theories such as the Family Systems Theory. In light of increasing numbers of transnational families and the importance of families as a readily available source of health information, it has become paramount to focus on communication processes of families separated by borders.

In Chapter 3, I described how I recruited and interviewed participants in this study, along with ethical considerations. I interviewed 7 transnational Filipinos living in Japan and 3 non-transnational family members in the Philippines resulting in a total of 7 family cases. Four of the 7 cases were selected from 22 respondents to a questionnaire survey and 3 were referred

by acquaintances. Lastly, in this chapter, the seven families including their members were described with their basic information, their relationships, and their vaccination status.

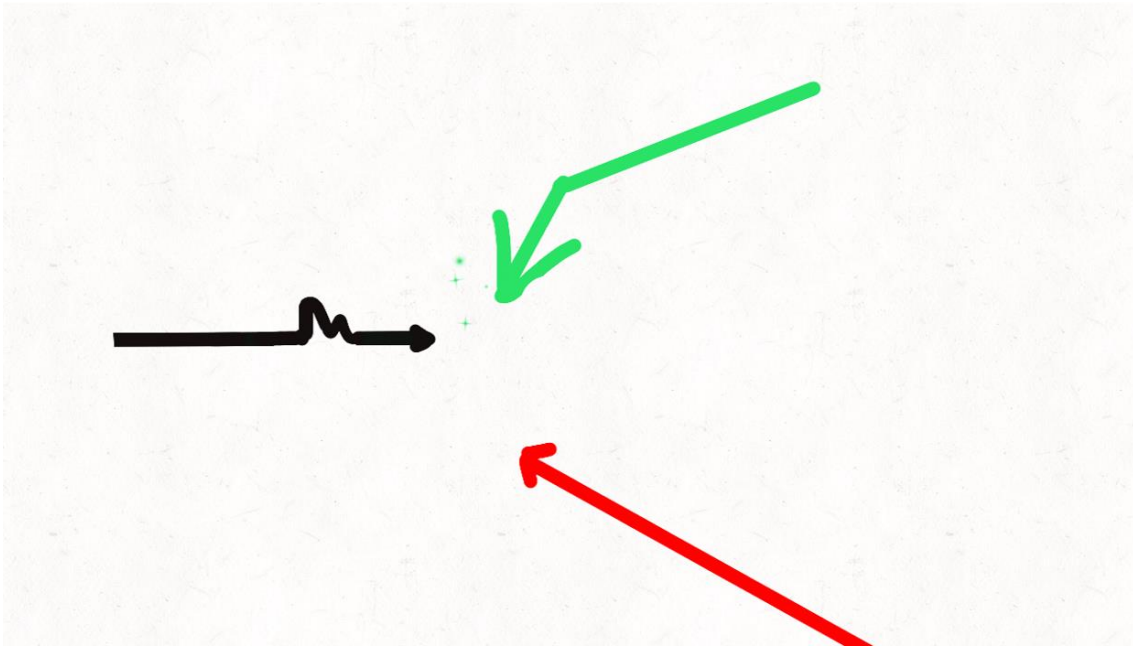
In Chapter 4, 15 factors affecting vaccine decisions were identified. These factors were almost the same as those in previous research. Among these is types of family communication. I analyzed family communication of vaccines and identified 5 types: (1) influence strategies to promote vaccination, (2) non-influence, (3) relaying information, (4) giving caution, and (5) answering questions. An important sub-type of influence strategies is the non-communication of hesitancy, which is used by transnational family members who prefer that their families be vaccinated despite their own hesitancy. They hide their vaccine status through self-censorship and geographic distance, and continue explicitly persuading their family members to get vaccinated. Similarly, non-influence involved the non-communication of negative vaccine sentiments of vaccine rejecters, who refused the vaccine for themselves, but allowed their families to make their own decisions without exerting influence.

In chapter 5, using Family Systems Theory as a theoretical framework, I discussed factors that affected transnational communication of vaccines and summarized how vaccine communication affected vaccine decisions of family members by using a causal loop diagram. Overall, vaccine communication was shown to reinforce existing vaccine beliefs of individuals. Hence, those who had positive vaccine beliefs are more likely to accept the vaccine when a vaccine acceptor gives them influence. Conversely, those who had negative beliefs are more likely to reject them. However, they could be convinced to accept the vaccine through social pressure in stressful situations. Family communication can also serve as a venue of discussion when members openly relay their concerns and allow others to clarify them and give reassurances.

In conclusion, this research generated important and in-depth case studies that provided a better understanding of how family communication can influence vaccine decisions of individual family members. The non-communication of hesitancy and anti-vaccine sentiments within families in this study also contributed to existing literature in transnational family communication about vaccines. This study was limited by the sampling method used; hence it is recommended to conduct further research that widens the scope of the subjects and increases the number of cases.

Key words: COVID-19, vaccine hesitancy, transnational family communication, vaccine communication, Family Systems Theory

## Alternative Inscription of Research



Changing minds  
(GIF animation)

Making a decision or making up one's mind is a difficult and complex process. Along the way, people may come and try to influence others through communication. Sometimes, those who influence are important and powerful people who are considered experts. Some can be enticed and immediately follow. Some may pick up ideas from this process of communication, but do not necessarily become fully convinced. Others may just pretend to listen, ignore, or even be silenced by strong and dominating ideas.

This research is about the process of vaccine communication which became an important occurrence during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this research, its complexities along with the intricacies of changing people's minds were examined.