

Information-Seeking within Negative Affect: Lessons from North Korean Refugees' Everyday Information Practices within PTSD

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ABSTRACT

The study examines how stressful life experiences and negative affective conditions influence refugees' information seeking and uses. Fifty-five North Korean refugees living in South Korea were invited to participate in a survey to determine their level of PTSD and to investigate the relationship between activeness in information-seeking and their negative affect. Seven subjects with severe PTSD symptoms participated in an in-depth interview to describe their information practices in daily life contexts. The study found that participants with higher levels of PTSD tended to seek information more passively than those with lower levels of PTSD. Almost all refugees were unable to recognize their information needs clearly but some subjects stated latent socio-affective needs and financial needs. Most refugees avoided seeking information and learned information through interpersonal sources—staffs in the *Hana* Refugee Center and volunteers in local community churches—and mass media. Some unique social phenomena were discovered in North Korean refugees' information world and the emergent features were discussed. On the basis of the findings, some practical approaches for improving refugees' information world were also suggested.

Keywords: Everyday Information Practice, Information Avoiding, North Korean Refugee, PTSD, Negative Affect

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1. Introduction

The study aims to investigate how refugees' negative affect and traumatic experiences influence their information practices in the process of resettlement and social inclusion in the host country. Among refugees' various and urgent information needs such as legal, linguistic, political, housing, and health problems, the research pays attention to their traumatic stressful life experiences and negative affective conditions, and focuses on exploring how negative affect impacts their information practices—information needs, seeking and uses—in daily life contexts (Koo, Cho and Gross 2011; Office of Refugee Resettlement in U.S. Department of Health & Human Services 2012).

Refugees are qualitatively different from general immigrants or newcomers. A refugee is defined as “any person who is outside any country of such person's nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” (Office of Refugee Resettlement in U.S. Department of Health & Human Services 2012). As shown in the definition, refugees have not voluntarily left their homes, and are thus called forced immigrants or involuntary immigrants (Rah 2007). While crossing different geographic, socio-economic, cultural, linguistic, and socio-affective borders involuntarily, refugees often suffer severe traumatic experiences, such as constant exposure to physical and emotional danger, loss and separation of family and home, abuse and injury, watching others commit these abuses and tortures, etc. (Griffiths 2001). Thus, in the field of Psychology, refugees are categorized as subjects who have had experienced to suffer symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD] (American Psychiatric Association 2000). Most people with PTSD symptoms have difficulties in thinking and concentrating, emotional distancing or numbness, self-degradation, hopelessness, depression, suicidal thoughts, etc. (Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma 1998). In coping with daily life stressors, people with PTSD tend to use the emotion-focused coping strategies, such as avoiding reality, distracting, fantasy, and/or self-blame, etc. rather than the problem-focused coping strategies, such as information-seeking, obtaining instrumental social supports, and/or realistic assessment of action, etc. (Lazarus and Folkman 1984).

Therefore, this study focuses on refugees' negative affect caused by severe traumatic experiences among urgent and serious life issues and investigating how they seek (or avoid) information to cope with their daily life hassles and stressors. In addition, this study tries to provide an initial understanding of refugees' everyday information practices when considering a major limitation

of existing refugees' information practices studies in the field of Library and Information Studies [LIS] is that only a small number of studies have been performed (Caidi, Allard and Quirke 2010; Quirke 2011). Hence, this study will contribute to the literature to describe refugees' information practices in LIS. On the practical side, findings will inform information professionals like librarians or other professionals like social workers who work with refugees, and provide input for developing tailored information services and instruction for refugees. In sum, the needs to depict refugees' information practices holistically and to explore the salient factors that affect their information practices will not only fill a gap in LIS literature, but also will support information professionals in serving the vulnerable like refugees practically.

2. Literature Review: Refugees' Information Practices in LIS

The refugee study in LIS has been growing steadily since the early 1990s, although the body of literature is small (Cho 2006). A search of, *Library and Information Science Abstract [LISA]* and *Library and Information Science and Technology Abstracts [LISTA]*, revealed about fifty relevant articles about refugees, asylum seekers, forced migrants, and displaced people between 1975 and the present. Yet, non-English materials, short or simple reports of one or two pages which contain librarians' experiences with refugees, essays and book reviews were excluded in this literature review and peer-reviewed journal articles were mainly selected. When analyzing articles chronologically, the study found two articles before the 1980s, six articles in 1980s, sixteen articles in 1990s, twenty-four articles in 2000s and seven articles in 2010s. This demonstrates that while the body of research in this area is still small, interest in the marginalized, such as immigrants and refugees, in LIS is gradually growing (Caidi, Allard and Quirke 2010; Case 2012; Cho 2006). While analyzing the published articles, the study could categorize the earlier studies into four themes: (a) Theme 1: To report exemplary cases in library services and programs for refugees (Attin 1981; Carpenter 2007; Gonzales 1999; Peteman 2002; Rhodes 2008; Vårheim 2014; Virgilio 2003; Ward 2003); (b) Theme 2: To suggest tailored library services and programs for refugees (Heyworth 2004; Holye 1980; Kanyengo and Kanyengo 2011; Stampino 2007; Thorhauge 2003); (c) Theme 3: To introduce information resources and collection for refugees and the information professionals who work for refugees (Beyani, Talal and Rhodes 1996; Brock 2001; Mason 1997; 1999a; 1999b; 2000a; 2000b; Mollel 2001; Rhodes 1996; 2003); (d) Theme 4: To analyze refugees' information needs and seeking behavior (Allen, Matthew and Boland 2004; Davis and Bath 2002;

Kennan et al. 2013; Lloyd et al. 2013; Olden 1999; Qayyum et al. 2014; Quirke 2011; Raddon and Smith 1998).

As shown in the earlier studies, a major limitation of refugees' information practices studies is that only a small number of studies have been performed. During the past 40 years, except for simple reports and statistics regarding refugees' information environments, very little research has been reported and peer-reviewed articles are very few. Even though there have been studies regarding refugees' information environments, they focused on introducing exemplary library services/programs, collection developments, or finding aids for librarians (Themes 1-3) rather than holistic approaches for understanding refugees' information practices. In that sense, only the eight studies in the fourth theme (Theme 4: To analyze refugees' information needs and seeking behavior) tried to examine refugees' needs and information seeking empirically. The detailed contents and analyses of eight articles within the fourth thematic category are as follows:

The first work to present a refugees' information need analysis is a report published in the British Library Research and Innovation Report (Raddon and Smith 1998). The study performed surveys with refugees living in the UK to scrutinize information needs and strategies to fulfill their needs. The study also performed surveys with library staffs who provide services to refugees in 99 public libraries and NGOs, and additionally conducted focus-group interviews. The study found that refugees' main needs are housing, legal rights, welfare, health, education/training, employment/job, languages. The main barriers to free accesses to information were a lack of cooperation between libraries and NGOs, and information services that do not consider refugees' level of literacy. Even though there is information they can use in NGOs or public libraries, the main reason for low accessibility and low rate of use in the information sources is information provision given from the viewpoint of suppliers (librarians or organization staffs). The report concluded there is a need to provide user-oriented services and information resources and to cooperate and make networks among similar organizations and information centers.

Olden (1999) studied information world of Somali refugees in London, UK, focusing on the Somali troubles, from an oral culture, experienced in a Western information environment. Most of Africa was largely an oral society, news by word of mouth still have an enormous significance for refugees. The study demonstrated how much current information systems are focused on written information and how, for refugee groups, this was a barrier to access. Davis and Bath (2002) also identified the main information sources used by Somali refugee women living in a northern city in the UK. They found out that Somali women met their health information needs thorough interpersonal sources—general practitioners, health visitors, friends, and neighbors. For Somali

refugee women, these problems also appeared to be compounded by first language illiteracy and limited knowledge of English. The study concluded that poor literacy skills may lead to insufficient information, and this might result in particular problems: Women may receive sub-standard care regardless of their English language abilities as a result of negative attitudes toward their ethnic or cultural group.

Allen, Matthew and Boland (2004) initiated a project to develop health literacy programs to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate health information for refugees. The authors addressed various barriers to access health information through this literacy project. Cultural and linguistic barriers were still the most serious handicaps of the Hmong refugee population, as well as other refugees. Refugees suffered serious post-traumatic stress disorders, but their traditional cultures were not accustomed to the Western approach to mental health and psychotherapy: Discourses with strangers were simply unacceptable. The research pointed out refugees' language limitations—an oral tradition, no written language, and limited educational opportunities—and suggested some alternatives for their health education.

Quirke (2011) identified the settlement needs of young (18-28 years old) Afghan refugees who had lived in Toronto, Canada for less than 10 years and explored their everyday information practices to make the transition of settlement. Through ethnographic study of observation and interview, Quirke found refugees' various settlement challenges including searching for housing and lawyers, family separation, learning English, navigating the refugee claimants, etc. In order to solve daily life problems, Afghan refugees obtained information via family members and friends as the primary information sources. As other secondary sources, they learned necessary information through ESL teachers, settlement workers—employees of agencies that receive government funding to provide information, referral, counseling and other services to newcomers to Canada.

Finally, Qayyum et al. (2014) performed a longitudinal study for understanding refugees' information environments and their information practices holistically. Connecting to their earlier studies—refugees' information practices and information literacies in the process of settlement in Australia (Kennan et al. 2011; Lloyd et al. 2013), this study used the previous data with the different viewpoint—the perspective of the service providers who assist with locating accommodation, orientation to community agencies, information about safety and child protection laws, literacy support, and induction to the Australian life. The study examined how the refugees recognize their new information environments; how service providers support refugees' community participation and reduce their information barriers; and how the service providers share information among themselves. Through in-depth interviews and focus groups, the study found that refugees experienced

information context complex and difficulties to navigate information; and suffered from information overload. The complexity of information by service providers produced information barriers, which constrained refugees' information uses and social participation. To reduce information complexity and overload, and provide more tailored information to refugees, the study suggests that service providers share information among themselves and with commercial agencies efficiently and effectively within more supported coordination/administration.

In a nutshell, except the only eight articles among about fifty studies, refugee studies in LIS could not have addressed the refugees' information practices—including their information needs and seeking behaviors and barriers—holistically. Therefore, there is a strong need, to describe refugees' information environments, to analyze their information barriers and needs, and to explore the main variables (e.g., negative affect, difficult live events or stressors, demographic profiles, cultural backgrounds, literacy skills, etc.) that affect their specific information practices or characteristics.

3. Method

3.1 Sampling

The target population of this study is a refugee group. As a sample, North Korean refugees currently living in South Korea were contacted and their level of traumatic stress and affective condition—the level of PTSD—was measured by embedding the questions from *Development of Trauma Scale for North Korean Refugees* (Kang 2001) into the survey. The subjects, who have high level of PTSD among survey participants, were asked to participate into the in-depth interview for describing their information needs, seeking, uses within traumatic experiences and their migration journey and social conditions.

Snowball sampling was used. Because refugees are “a hard-to-reach or hard-to-identify population” (Schutt 2006, 157), the use of probability sampling was not possible. North Korean refugees were contacted via several informants—directors of local community churches, staffs of local social welfare centers, staffs of *Hana* Refugee Centers, etc.—to refer potential participants in South Korea. Other potential participants were referred through the study participants who were already recruited for the study and completed the interview and/or survey. When North Korean refugees expressed interest in the research via informants, the researcher met the subjects at local refugee welfare centers, local community churches, or the *Hana* Refugee Center where refugees

regularly visit to meet staffs or volunteers for obtaining help or information. At that time, the researcher explained the research purpose and methods, potential risks and benefits. After the explanation, only participants who submitted the signed assent to participate in the research were invited to take part in the survey and in-depth interview. During about three months (from June 9th, 2013 to Aug 18th, 2013), North Korean refugees at the three cities—Busan, Daegu and Seoul—in South Korea were contacted and participated in the research. The selection of new interviewees continued until the saturation point—the point when new interview yields little additional information—was reached (Schutt 2006).

3.2 Data Collection

(1) Survey: Total fifty-five North Korean refugees (N=55) in South Korea were participated in the research. The contents of the survey questions consist of three parts: (a) Measurement of PTSD by using the questions from *Development of Trauma Scale for North Korean Refugees* (Kang 2001) (16 items); (b) Information-seeking including activeness in information-seeking and used information sources (7 items); (c) Demographic characteristics and the process of crossing borders (8 items). In order to measure refugees' negative affective conditions, the study used the questionnaire with 16 items related into traumatic experiences in North Korea and during escaping North Korea, and a 5-point scale range from never (1) to frequently (5) is implemented. Only subjects with over 48 points in total sum were regarded as subjects with high level of PTSD according to the technical direction of the measurement. The survey was held in Korean at local community churches, local welfare centers, or the *Hana* Refugee Center.

(2) In-depth Interview: Among the subjects identified as having a high level of PTSD in the survey (n=24), the seven subjects (n=7) voluntarily participated in the intensive interview to address their experiences in North Korea, crossing the boarders, entry into South Korea and adjusting to the new societies they entered. The interview focused on describing how refugees recognized or sought information in order to cope with trauma and hardship and how they overcame and/or bore their daily life stressors. A semi-structured interview schedule was prepared as a memory-aid to guide the interview processes and attain consistency in interrogating many interviewees. The interview was held at local community churches where the interviewees regularly attend and took about three hours or more. All interviews were conducted one-on-one in Korean. The contents of the interview were digitally recorded with audio-files.

3.3 Data Analysis

All data acquired from the survey and intensive interview were transcribed in Korean, and then were translated into English. Another bilingual (Korean-English) translator was recruited to validate the correctness of the translation. The one researcher conducted all data coding. In detail, the analysis of data acquired from the survey was performed using the *SPSS Statistics Software Version 19*. Analysis of demographic information and information-seeking was summarized using descriptive statistics. As the main goal of the survey was to screen for individuals who have high level of PTSD, the analysis focused on looking for association between participants' characteristics within the level of PTSD. Thus, the research analyzed PTSD level in terms of subjects' demographic features and information-seeking using cross-tabulation.

On the other hand, the analysis of the transcribed interview data in English utilized the procedures of grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Qualitative analysis of the interview data was performed using the computer software *QSR NVivo 10*. The interview contents were imported into the *NVivo 10* program and then coded and grouped into categories. The categories themselves were re-analyzed after each round, allowing for modifications as needed (e.g., re-naming, splitting, eliminating or creating categories, etc.). According to the emergent themes, the categories were also re-assigned, re-organized. In summarizing and classifying the contents within main themes, the analysis focused on seeking for similarities and patterns in interviewees' narration.

4. Finding

4.1 Survey Result

The basic demographic information of research participants (N=55) was described and analyzed: age, gender, religion, cross-cultural experience, marital status, education, period to stay in the host country, residence condition with whom they live (whether they live with family members, single or other refugee group members), experiences in the third countries (other countries refugees temporarily stopped by or stayed before coming into the host country), etc. The purpose of the survey was to screen for subjects matching a profile consistent with a high level of PTSD and to learn how a high level of PTSD symptoms affects their information-seeking patterns (active vs. passive). Therefore, demographic information such as age, gender, religion, and length of

stay in South Korea, etc. were classified as to whether participants' level of PTSD symptoms (low vs. high).

Conclusively, the cross-tabulation analyses clearly demonstrated that there is no relationship between PTSD level and demographic information. For instance, we might assume that female subjects maybe suffer from more severe PTSD symptoms because it is generally regarded as that women are more sensitive to affective factors than men. Also we usually assume that those who involve in religious activities might be less vulnerable or more resilient to traumatic experiences than any others. In addition, we easily assume that people who have lived long periods in the host country, have been exposed from much cross-cultural experiences, or escaped from their home country in their young ages might be less vulnerable from the PTSD symptoms. Yet, the finding revealed that their demographic features such as gender, religion, or length of the stay in the host country did not affect their PTSD symptoms at all (Tables 1-3).

〈Table 1〉 Relationship between Gender and PTSD

Gender	Male	Female	Total
Low Level of PTSD	6 (19.4%)	25 (80.6%)	31 (100%)
High Level of PTSD	9 (37.5%)	15 (62.5%)	24 (100%)
Total	15 (27.3%)	40 (72.7%)	55 (100%)

〈Table 2〉 Relationship between Religion and PTSD

Religion	Atheism	Christianity	Catholic	Buddhism	No Response	Total
Low Level of PTSD	1 (3.2%)	26 (83.9%)	1 (3.2%)	1 (3.2%)	2 (6.5%)	31 (100%)
High Level of PTSD	4 (16.7%)	20 (83.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	24 (100%)
Total	5 (9.1%)	46 (83.7%)	1 (1.8%)	1 (1.8%)	2 (3.6%)	55 (100%)

〈Table 3〉 Relationship between Length of the Stay in S. Korea and PTSD

Year	1-5	6-10	11-15	Total
Low Level of PTSD	27 (87.1%)	4 (12.9%)	0 (0.0%)	31 (100%)
High Level of PTSD	22 (91.6%)	1 (4.2%)	1 (4.2%)	24 (100%)
Total	49 (89.1%)	5 (9.1%)	1 (1.8%)	55 (100%)

However, the cross-tabulation analysis to examine the relationship between activeness in information-seeking and level of PTSD indicated that the group with a high level of PTSD symptoms

tends to passively engage in information seeking (Table 4). Conversely the group with low level PTSD tended to seek information actively. Through Pearson's chi-squared test (χ^2), it was also confirmed that there is significant relationship with PTSD and their activeness in information seeking ($\chi^2=4.401$, $p=0.049$).

〈Table 4〉 Relationship between Activeness in Information-Seeking and PTSD

Activeness of Information-Seeking		PTSD		Total
		Low	High	
Active	Frequency	21	10	31
	% of Total PTSD	67.7%	32.3%	100%
	Total (%)	38.2%	18.2%	56.4%
Passive	Frequency	10	14	24
	% of Total PTSD	41.7%	58.3%	100%
	Total (%)	18.2%	25.4%	43.6%
Total	Frequency	31	24	55
	% of Total PTSD	100.0%	100.0%	100%
	Total (%)	56.4%	43.6%	100%

Finally, the study explored relationships between level of PTSD and the kinds of information sources that refugees use to bear their daily life problems and/or satisfy their information needs. Cross-tabulation analysis did not demonstrate any significant relationships. There were no relationships between PTSD level and the types of used information sources.

4.2 Interview Result

4.2.1 Demographic Profiles and Motivation to Escape from North Korea

Twenty-four refugees ($n=24$, 43.6%) among the research participants ($N=55$, 100%) were suffered from the high levels of PTSD symptoms. A total of seven North Korean refugees ($n=7$) among the potential interviewees who earned a high level of PTSD symptoms in the survey ($n=24$) voluntarily participated in an intensive interview process. Four male and three female subjects took part in the in-depth interview and their average age is 34.9 years old ($M=34.9$; $SD=10.4$). The interviewees have stayed in South Korea during 4.4 years ($M=4.4$; $SD=3.5$). All interviewees could not enter the host country directly but came via the third countries such as China or Cambodia, and have resided in the intermediate countries during about 4.7 years ($M=4.7$; $SD=3.5$) as undocumented immigrants after escaping from North Korea. All subjects are married but currently

separated from their family members except one participant because most refugees failed to escape from North Korea with all family members together. All interviewees do have no job except one (Table 5).

〈Table 5〉 Interviewees' Demographic Characteristics

Name	Gender	Age	Period of Stay in S. Korea	Period of Stay in the Third Countries as an Undocumented Immigrant	Job	Marital Status	Level of PTSD
#1	F	35	5 years	5 years: Staying in China	No	Married (separated with husband)	High
#2	M	23	2 years	10 years: Staying in China	No	Married (separated with wife)	High
#3	M	28	10 years	6 years: Staying in China	No	Married (separated with wife)	High
#4	F	45	3 years	6 years: Staying in China	No	Married (separated with husband)	High
#5	F	37	2 years	6 years: Staying China	No	Married (separated with husband)	High
#6	M	51	8 years	1 month: Staying in China	Welder	Married (staying with all family members)	High
#7	M	25	8 months	1 month: Staying in China&Cambodia	No	Married (separated with wife)	High

The main reasons refugees decided to escape from North Korea can be summarized as two things: (a) Starvation, malnutrition, and extreme poverty; (b) Disappointment with North Korean government and no hope for the future. According to the *2013 Global Hunger Index* (International Food Policy Research Institute 2013), North Korea scored 18 in hunger index and the level is classed as alarming within ranges from extremely alarming, alarming, serious, moderate and low. The situation has worsened since 1990 when the country usually scored 16.2, the proportion of the population that is undernourished has risen to about 32% in that time (International Food Policy Research Institute, 2013). The participants' testimonies were congruent with facts from international statistics and news reports about severe poverty and starvation of North Korea society. To escape from the deprivation of basic human right and starvation, most refugees decided to escape from North Korea despite the threat of government surveillance in hopes to find a life that better supported their survival and autonomy.

4.2.2 Severe Traumatic Experiences in Migration Journey

During living in North Korea; crossing boarders via the third countries; living in the third

countries (intermediate countries) with illegal status as undocumented immigrants; and arriving in South Korea, all interviewees agreed that they have experienced traumatic experiences and have suffered from PTSD symptoms such as nightmare, intrusive memories, avoidance, angry outburst, numbness, anxiety, shame, etc.

(1) *Living in North Korea:* The hardships that the refugees suffered in North Korea can be summarized in three ways: (a) No freedom or hope living under government surveillance; (b) Severe poverty and starvation; and (c) Psychological hurt by separation from family members in the processes of escaping from North Korea and experiences of abandonment and betrayal even by their own family members. These distressing experiences in North Korea connect with a main motivation to escape from North Korea.

(2) *Crossing borders and living in the third countries (China, Cambodia, etc.):* Not only did refugees suffer hardships in crossing the boarder from North Korea, but once across the boarder they experienced continuous starvation and struggles because of their status of illegal immigration in the third countries. The hardship in the third countries can be epitomized as four things: (a) Intense fear they can be caught by the authorities and be repatriated to North Korea; (b) Unfair treatment in economic and social activities by illegal immigration—discrimination and continuous poverty; (c) Language and cultural barriers; (d) Painful memories by their family members' and brokers' betrayal and report, and separation with family members during crossing borders.

The interviewees entered the third countries illegally and temporarily because it is impossible to enter South Korea directly. Thus, these refugees had to hide to live with fear of threat they could deport back to North Korean securities and authorities. All participants know that if they are deported back to North Korea, they will be sent to jail or executed to death. In addition, the refugees encountered language and cultural barriers in the new country as well as discrimination because of the only fact that they are refugees. The fact they are foreigners who are unfamiliar with new language and culture brought about social discrimination by the natives. All interviewees testified these contempt and affective distress were much more painful than physical hardship or starvation. Also, their illegal status and linguistic and cultural barriers are connected to the fact they cannot get stable and good jobs, and it resulted in their continuous poverty. Moreover, some refugees experienced betrayal by family members who reported them to the North Korean government, as well as lying and fraud on the part of brokers they had paid for assistance in crossing boarders. They all agreed that distrust of others was more difficult and painful to bear than physical harassment or famine.

(3) *Staying in South Korea:* All interviewees addressed that they have experienced neglect,

rejection, discrimination, and isolation from South Koreans because of the only fact that they are North Korean refugees. Even in South Korea, they had similar difficulties they experienced in China or Cambodia as undocumented immigrants except the fear that they might be repatriated to North Korea: (a) Weak sense to be belonged to new country because of natives' (South Koreans') humiliation and ignorance; (b) Language barriers and cultural shock due to being grown up in different economic and political systems; (c) Difficulties to get good jobs and poverty. North Korean refugees have had basic expectation that they might be properly treated in this new country because they think both South Koreans and North Koreans have the same ethnic background, culture and language. When the basic expectation could not be fulfilled in South Korea, they have experienced much more disappointment than in North Korea or the third countries. To make matters worse, growing up in a different culture with different political and socio-economic systems, as well as different language expression and accents made it difficult for these refugees to communicate with the natives—South Koreans. This, in turn, made it hard for these refugees to adjust to new home country and prevented them from establishing a sense of belonging in the new society. These barriers and differences resulted in a sense of low self-esteem and psychological inferiority, and bolstered refugees' sense that they are still alienated from this new society. Their experiences of fraud and/or betrayal left them with low expectations about the new society and they became more passive and withdrawn in coping with their current challenges. These behaviors finally yielded the result of continuous struggle with poverty and severe negative affect in the new society.

4.2.3 Refugees' Information Practices: Information Needs, Seeking and Uses

(1) Current Information Needs: North Korean refugees' main issues and key information needs can be analyzed as three things: (a) To be welcomed by the new society members and feel a sense of belonging to the new society; (b) To learn new social norm, culture, and language; (c) To learn information about job and finances. Yet, (d) almost all refugees could not express their real and latent information needs verbally but ignored information needs or deceived their current situations.

In detail, all interviewees confessed that they do not need information at all even though they have been struggling with the daily life problems that they should solve in new country. They think it is useless or luxury to ask information in their current and painful conditions. Furthermore, almost all refugees were reluctant to express their real needs directly because they were afraid of being excluded and ignored by their new society members if other people—especially the natives, South Koreans—know the status that they are North Korean refugees. Rather, they ignored

their current necessities themselves or deceived their backgrounds that they are from North Korea.

Nevertheless, they addressed that their first and most critical need is to be welcomed by the new society and to feel a sense of belonging to the new country. This socio-affective need is prior to any other basic physical needs such as to get a stable job or to receive legal or medical information for resettlement. Not only are refugees struggling with negative affects by symptoms of PTSD, but also have almost all refugees experienced to be neglected, discriminated against, and excluded from the natives. Accordingly, the refugees showed strong desire to be accepted as new society members and to feel the sense of being belonged to the new society. Strictly speaking, this socio-affective need is more close to the manners to receive information rather than specific types of information sources or information itself. It was much more significant to the refugees how they receive information than what kinds of information they obtain.

Refugees' second need is to become accustomed to new social norm, culture, and language of the new country. They believe that their maladroitness of new language and culture resulted in the sense to be excluded from the new society members. Because refugees have not learned English in North Korean school curriculum nor use English in North Korea, they have had difficulties in communicating with South Koreans who use simple English words frequently and are westernized in various domains of their everyday life. Hence, refugees want to be accustomed to new social norms and communicate with South Koreans without any cultural and linguistic barriers. They eagerly wanted to make friends to learn social norm of the new country but they did not try to seek solutions or any specific information for them.

Finally, refugees' third need is to get information about job and finances. Even though they came to South Korea to escape from poverty and famine, they have still struggled with financial dearth and unemployed conditions. They want to find a good job and live a stable life in the new society.

(2) *Used Information Sources and Channels:* As one of coping strategies to fulfill with their needs, North Korean refugees selected to refrain from using information sources. Regarding the first and second needs—to belong to the new society and adjust to new social norms and culture—almost all did not try to find out information or any help-seeking at all. Yet, in the third need—to get information of finance and jobs—they sought for relevant information via interpersonal sources and/or mass media (advertisement) passively.

In detail, even though refugees realized their current life hassles and acknowledged necessities of information to nullify the difficulties, they tried to hide their demand itself because of the fear to be humiliated or discriminated if they reveal that they do not know about anything as

inquiring help and seeking information. Even though they seek to learn information through their interpersonal sources such as neighbors (South Koreans) or staffs in the local welfare centers, their socio-cultural barriers—differences of language and culture—prevented the refugees understanding the contents of information that their neighbors or staffs provide. At the result, they regarded the information as uselessness in solving their crucial problems. Not only because of the affective insecurity by untrustworthiness in inquiring information, but also because of irrelevance and complexity of the information provided by staffs of refugee centers/community centers, the refugees usually refrained from seeking information and tried to ignore their current necessities.

Nevertheless, if they seek and use information, first, they mostly used informal information sources such as interpersonal sources—talking with others—rather than formal information sources like library systems. Among these interpersonal sources, they firstly and mostly sought for information through the staffs working in the *Hana* Refugee Center. The *Hana* Refugee Center is the education center for North Korean refugees operated by the South Korean government and the initial contact point that refugees can meet South Koreans and learn about the new society. While staying the *Hana* Refugee Center during about three months for education, they learned information for adjusting to new life from these staffs and became naturally acquainted with these staffs. Even after leaving the *Hana* Refugee Center, the refugees continued to ask questions to the staffs via calling and/or direct visiting the Center. Among some reasons to learn information from the staffs of the *Hana* Refugee Center, the refugees pointed out that staffs' kind manners to provide information rather than the quantity and/or quality of information they supply. The second interpersonal source the refugees used was other North Korean refugees who met in the *Hana* Refugee Center or at the same local community churches. Even though they did not trust the quality or precision of the information that other North Korean refugees supply, the refugees usually learned information from other refugees because they believe that they can easily communicate with these refugees without any socio-cultural barriers. Above all, the refugees felt the safety on the fact that they had same kinship and similar experiences. As the third interpersonal information source, they trusted local community church members or volunteers. Most refugees confessed that they have received much benefit and help from volunteers and members in the local community churches they attend.

As the second information source, refugees mostly get information throughout mass media such as TV or local newspapers. Regarding their third information need—to get information about job, mostly they relied on the advertisement of local newspaper, classifieds or brochures from flea markets.

(3) *The Meaning of Information:* The refugees regarded information as the news to help them

get accustomed to the new society. To satisfy with the conditions as information, the refugees empathized that information should be credible and accurate rather than other factors such as timely or accessible, etc. Most interviewees did not limit formats about information but included interpersonal sources such as talking with people. Yet, they were not able to recognize the differences between information and information sources. They thought information source itself as information.

5. Discussion: Salient Phenomena in Refugees' Information Practices

The research analyzed the emergent phenomena from the findings and interpreted the contexts and meanings of the phenomena within possible conceptual frameworks (theories/models) in LIS. Three main themes were explicated and relevant theoretical frameworks to interpret these features were suggested and discussed.

5.1 Information-Avoiding and Information Poverty

Refugees with severe PTSD symptoms coped with their situations passively, especially in fulfilling with socio-affective information needs (Information Need 1 & 2): They easily ignored information needs themselves and abandoned seeking information. The emergent phenomena—ignorance of information needs, passive information-seeking and information-avoiding—in refugees' information world can be interpreted by information poverty theories and stress-coping theories.

5.1.1 Information Poverty by Self-Protective Behavior—Secrecy and Deception

In the questions about information seeking, most refugees answered that they tried to ignore their current condition itself. As the main reason, they pointed out fear and risk that other people (South Koreans) might discriminate or exclude them if other people know that they are North Korean refugees and they do not know about something. They hid their critical difficulties or information needs, and deceived even their identity that they are from North Korea. According to Chatman's study (1996), the phenomenon to deceive their real conditions and to distrust information offered by outsiders is regarded as one feature of information poverty. The research for retired old women's information poverty found that aged women of a retirement village did not share the most critical information needs and challenges—health concerns, inability to cope, loneliness, etc. Exposing the

true precarious state of their health, they had fear to be banished from the community. Through secrecy and deception about their real conditions—health information needs, the aged women protected themselves. This refugee research also found that the same with the phenomena described in prepositions that Chatman provided the parameters to explain information poverty: “Preposition 4: Both secrecy and self-deception are self-protecting mechanisms due to a sense of mistrust regarding the interest or ability of others to provide useful information; Preposition 5: A decision to risk exposure about our true problems is often not taken due to a perception that negative consequences outweigh benefits” (Chatman 1996, 197). Through the secrecy and deception about refugees’ current conditions and urgent necessities, they defended themselves from outsiders’ (South Koreans’) contempt, stigma and discrimination. Accordingly, it is possible to explain that these fear made refugee ignore their needs or seek immediately relevant sources such as mass media or interpersonal sources rather than pertinent information to fulfill the fundamental and real needs, in an attempt at self-protection.

5.1.2 Information Poverty by Limited Information Literacy Competencies

It is possible to expound the reasons of refugees’ information avoiding in the perspective of their limited information literacy skills. These refugees were not assessed for information literacy skills with objective scales, and the evaluation is outside the scope of this study. However, according to the definition of information literacy skill by *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (ACRL 2000), the refugees seem to have limited skills to decide the extent of information needs and evaluate information sources and then choose them. For instance, they were unable to recognize or interpret their latent needs (e.g., poverty and hunger—financial needs) as specific information needs (e.g., information needs for finding jobs and/or opening bank accounts). Also, they could not distinguish between information and information sources in the questions about their own perception of information. They regarded information as information sources such as newspaper or TV. Thus, if they could not obtain the necessary information from mass media or interpersonal sources, they did not try to inquire other possible information sources but stopped looking for information. Even after experiencing dissatisfaction with these used information sources, they kept using the same information sources and tried to ignore their current problems themselves. Moreover, their limited literacy skills in English allowed them to ignore information sources with many English words such as the Internet. Conclusively, these limited information literacy skills and English skills made them seek information passively by using the limited information sources such as interpersonal information sources—talking with other refugees or staffs in welfare centers—and/or mass media only.

5.1.3 Information Poverty by Information Uses within Insufficient Information Pools

The research found that the North Korean refugees preferred interpersonal and informal information sources to formal information sources. The refugees usually turned to people when searching for necessary information: They tried to talk with comfortable and trusted people such as staffs in the *Hana* Refugee Center or neighbors (other North Korean refugees) rather than looking for formal and written information via libraries. Yet, in accord with earlier studies in LIS, the use of interpersonal sources is not a unique attribute of refugees' information world but a general phenomenon that almost all people practice naturally (Case 2012; Harris and Dewdney 1994).

However, information poverty theories interpret the phenomenon as information poverty by uses of interpersonal information sources within limited and similar group members (insiders). Childers and Post (1975) defined information poverty as a 'culture' of the disadvantaged by pointing out three characteristics, rather than physical or economical features. The three features are: "(a) a low level of processing skills, marked by reading, language, hearing, or eyesight deficiencies (b) social isolation in a subculture, leading to unawareness of information known to a large public, reliance upon rumor and folklore, and dependence on entertainment-oriented media like television and (c) a tendency to feel fatalistic and helpless, which in turn reduces the likelihood of active information seeking." (Case 2012, 114). The second feature of information poverty is congruent with the reason of refugees' reliance on interpersonal information sources and mass media. The misunderstanding and unfamiliarity of new country's communication styles and new culture allowed refugees to seek information via same North Korean refugee community rather than to seek information via formal information systems like libraries in the host country. However, the quality of the information transferred through interpersonal communication of the same refugee groups is sometimes "uneven, leading to a trial-and-error approach to navigate local information systems, which is often costly and demoralizing" (Courtright 2005, para 1). Furthermore, refugees depended on the advertisement from classified or flea market newspaper in order to acquire information for job or finances. The information from these commercial advertisements provides limited and biased information in their quality and credibility rather than providing systematic and holistic information. Therefore, refugees' dependence on interpersonal information sources and mass media may exacerbate their impoverished conditions (Harris and Dewdney 1994).

5.1.4 Information Poverty by Negative Affects

Refugees defined the information as something important to adjust to the new country and the news, but they did not take any particular action to seek the important things in their daily

life. Among many reasons to explain contradiction between their conception and actual behavior about information seeking, they pointed out the two main factors: (a) Barriers by their negative affective condition—severe symptoms of PTSD; (b) Barriers in language and socio-culture in the new society. As it is noted in the survey results and their testimonies, all interviewees have suffered from typical symptoms of PTSD such as nightmares, numbness, indifference, avoidance of new facts or realities, hard to trust others, a sense of emptiness, loneliness, and/or depression, etc. Controversially with the above refugee's depression or numbness, they suffered from their sudden and furious anger without any specific reason. These unstable affective conditions made them ignore their current problems as a defense mechanism rather than facing the problems and searching for the solutions.

According to the Children and Post's definition of information poverty (1975), the above phenomenon can be also explained as information poverty theory. Especially the third characteristics of information poverty—"a tendency to feel fatalistic and helpless, which in turn reduces the likelihood of active information seeking." (Case 2012, 114)—rationalizes the reason that the North Korean refugees easily abandon seeking information and avoid their current problems. In this respect, stress-coping theories in Psychology have also explained why people may avoid information, even though their need for information to overcome their difficult situations is strong (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). According to stress-coping theories, information seeking (or non-seeking, avoiding) is regarded as one reaction among various coping strategies for dealing with stresses and concerns. Among various coping strategies, affectively vulnerable people like refugees have a tendency to use emotion-focused coping strategies such as ignoring current conditions in order to defend themselves from negative realities and uncontrollable stressors. Accordingly, refugees' frequent uses of emotion-focused coping strategies including information-avoiding by negative affect may intensify their impoverished information environments.

5.2 Information Sharing at Information Ground

The research discovered that refugees relied on interpersonal information sources via North Korean refugees, staffs in local community churches and/or *Hana* Refugee Center for learning necessary information. Local churches and *Hana* Refugee Center were their main and significant social places in learning information among refugees. However, the characteristics of the two social spaces were somewhat different: Local community churches played the role as Information Ground and the *Hana* Refugee Center played as the key information source to acquire main

information.

Information Ground (Pettigrew 1999) can be an appropriate conceptual framework to explicate the social phenomena that North Korean refugees' information sharing with North Korean refugees or other members (South Korean volunteers) within the local community churches. One of the main attributes of Information Ground is that social interaction is a key activity and information flow within social activities is a by-product. Through these social activities and communication, individuals naturally take part in information sharing and sometimes encounter significant information at Information Ground. These research participants also engaged in various events and services in their local community churches and shared information with other North Korean refugees or learned the information from the church members or volunteers (South Koreans) in the same churches.

On the other hand, most refugees obtained important information from staffs in the *Hana* Refugee Center. Yet, it is hard to call this Center as Information Ground because the refugees learned key information from this Center for surviving in the new country but there were little social activities within staffs or other refugees in the Center. Refugees received essential information from staffs in the Center in the one-side rather than exchanging information throughout social interaction in the two-sides. Most refugees distrusted information sources from outsiders such as South Korean neighbors, but they trusted information served from the staffs in the *Hana* Refugee Center. In this sense, the *Hana* Refugee Center played the significant role as a key information source in refugees' information world.

5.3 Two-step Information Flow

The refugees indirectly acquired information through information sources that *Hana* Refugee Center staffs indicate rather than accessing the necessary information from formal information systems/sources directly. To obtain trustful information, they learned information through credible information imposers or information mediators—staffs in the *Hana* Refugee Center or volunteers in local community churches. This way the refugee use information can be explained by the 'two-step flow' theory in the field of Communication. The two-step flow theory interprets the social phenomenon that transmit information from formal information sources, such as mass media, to people, particularly information gatekeepers who filter and pass on new information to their close and reliable acquaintances such as family members (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). The role of information gatekeepers or intermediaries is very crucial in the information sharing and individuals' source selection processes. Earlier studies in LIS, in applying this model to information environments

and population, examined the roles of information gatekeepers or human mediators (e.g., Agada, 1999; Chatman 1987; Metoyer-Duran 1993, etc.). These studies confirmed that information gatekeepers still played the important roles in interpersonal information uses in various social contexts and vulnerable groups, such as low-income communities or minority ethnic groups like immigrants/refugees. Through the two-step flow model and the following applied empirical studies in related fields, including LIS, it is necessary to acknowledge the significant roles of human information mediators to assist information flows and filter the quality/quantity and credibility of information.

6. Suggestion: Practical Implication

On the basis of analyzing the emergent phenomena in the information practices of North Korean refugees with PTSD, this research suggests some alternatives to improve refugees' information environments.

6.1 Supporting Information Gatekeepers through Collaborating with Public Libraries

This study found that the staffs in the *Hana* Refugee Center and volunteers in local community churches play significant roles as information gatekeepers and intermediaries in refugees' assimilation and adjustment in the new society. Moreover, the *Hana* Refugee Center played the roles of a prime contact point and an acculturating agent between these refugees and the new country. Reflecting these staffs' critical roles and authority as main information-providers and acculturating agents, it is required to educate *Hana* Refugee Center staffs' and church volunteers' information literacy skills and cultural competence skills, and maintain their qualification so that refugees can collect credible and tailored information. Within current refugees' social contexts and information use patterns, information gatekeepers' qualification or levels of information literacy skills should be guaranteed.

On the other hand, the information, that outsiders (South Koreans) (Chatman 1996)—*Hana* Refugee Center staffs and church volunteers—provide, often made new refugees difficult in understanding the meaning fully because of the cultural differences and unfamiliarity about new society. Even though these information gatekeepers and mediators provide core and qualified information and

have willingness to support these refugees, the refugees may not comprehend the meaning of the information and do not utilize the information into their life problems if these mediators serve information with unsuitable manners. The misunderstanding and dissatisfaction of the information that information mediators provide make the refugees rely on insufficient and limited interpersonal information sources within similar North Korean refugee communities and mass media. Therefore, it is significant for information gatekeepers—*Hana* refugee Center staffs and volunteers in local churches—to learn not only qualified and relevant information sources but also the appropriate ways to serve information sources to them.

For staffs' and volunteers' support and education in information literacy and cultural competence skills, it is strategically necessary to collaborate with information professionals including public librarians to provide systematic literature for refugees. With the core literature evaluated by information professionals—public librarians, the staffs of the *Hana* Refugee Center need to develop education programs and projects for acquiring key information sources and cultural competence for settling down to the new society. Within information professionals' aid and cooperation in public libraries, these information gatekeepers and cultural agents will be able to support refugees with qualified information within interpersonal information channels.

6.2 PR of Library: Developing Tailored Information Services for Refugees and Advertising the Existence

In the research findings, the refugees never regarded libraries as meaningful information sources/centers that they could fulfill their information needs. Indeed, these refugees did not know that they could receive various information sources and services from public libraries or librarians. In light of current refugees' limited ideas about formal information systems and their services, the study suggests public libraries and information professionals actively advertising information services and programs to their community members, including refugees and their families. Information professionals need to inform these refugee groups the information services available in public libraries within their community and to advertise the diverse library services and programs that community members can ask for and receive. Yet, before making PR of library services and functions, it is also required to develop qualified information sources and services after evaluating the community members' characteristics and information needs, as well as their detailed information use environments.

6.3 Eliminating the Socio-Affective Barriers through Cultivating the Mood to Respect and Welcome Refugees

The finding of the study confirmed the previous findings about immigrants and refugees' information world in LIS: A welcoming and inclusive mood is a very critical factor not only for their accommodation to new society but also for their information sources selection and credibility (Fisher, Durrance and Hinton 2004; Caidi and Allard 2005; Reitmanova and Gustafson 2008). The finding was exactly same with the results of this refugee research. If the refugees of this research could not feel comfortable with accessing information, they did not use the information sources nor put credibility into the information systems or sources, either. Among various reasons not to use formal information systems and sources, the refugees importantly pointed out the emotional barriers. Therefore, it is imperative to keep in mind for information providers including librarians, staffs in the *Hana* Refugee Center, and volunteers in the local churches to cultivate a welcoming and secure mood associated to information environments and users. To make refugees use information sources or services without any socio-affective barriers, the information providers in formal information systems need to create an atmosphere that refugees consider secure and inclusive, and the delivery should correspond to refugees' socio-affective subculture. In addition, it is important to cultivate the friendly and comfortable image of information systems and services as well as developing credible and pertinent information sources.

6.4 Reconsidering Significant Roles of Human Intermediaries

The research asserts that the significance of human mediators (e.g., *Hana* Refugee Center staffs, volunteers in local churches) to booster to use information between information systems/sources (e.g., public libraries or the Internet) and end-users (e.g., the vulnerable like North Korean refugees). Even though information professionals develop excellent information systems for specific user groups, these vulnerable end-users cannot initiate to use the information systems without human mediators' assistance and guidance. If these end-users feel fear in accessing the information systems/sources because of their negative affects, limited literacy skills and/or unfamiliarity of information system, it is hard for these end-users to try to access these information systems directly by themselves. Therefore, as a future research agenda, the research suggests testing if it is possible to make vulnerable end-users start to use information systems without aids from human information mediators or imposers as well as testing usability of information systems. On the basis of the

findings, it is requisite for information providers or information system developers to reconsider the critical roles of human mediators for promoting and initiating to use information systems for the user groups who cannot access and use information systems or sources by themselves.

7. Conclusion

The research explored refugees' impoverished information world as avoiding information or ignoring/deceiving their critical needs because of their negative affect, traumatic experiences and cultural and linguistic barriers in the new society. On basis of the research findings, the study recommended practical implication for improving refugees' disadvantaged information world and suggested information providers paying attention to the manners to supply information as well as types of information or information sources. In addition, the study proposed analyzing vulnerable groups' affective conditions and socio-cultural barriers that strongly influence their information practices, as well as the significant roles of human mediators to booster the information-seeking of the vulnerable like refugees who are unable to utilize information systems and sources voluntarily and directly. Fundamentally, the study, which examined information practices of refugees with severe traumatic stressors within their daily life contexts, might be the first step for understanding information practices of the general population (non-refugee groups) coping with negative emotion, such as cancer patients with chronic stress, people who have had difficult life experiences (e.g., victims of natural disaster, abuse, divorce, etc.) or affective problems (e.g., anxiety, loneliness, depression, etc.).

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