

Immigrants' Church Participation and Community Integration: The Mediating Role of the Local Storytelling Network

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This article investigates the implications of church participation for immigrants' commitment to their broader community. Utilizing communication infrastructure theory, this study introduces a communication lens for exploring the civic potential of immigrant churches in diverse urban communities. Supplementing the theory with social capital concepts of bonding and bridging, and observations made in the civic engagement literature on spillover effects, this study examines how immigrants' church participation shapes their neighborhood belonging and integration into the local storytelling network. Self-administered surveys conducted in 2015 with members of a large Korean immigrant church in Los Angeles inform the research findings. Regression analyses indicate that church-based social ties and civic participation promote members' integration into their local communities. Furthermore, findings support a communication mediation model in which the local storytelling network mediates the relationship between church participation and community integration.

Keywords: communication infrastructure theory, social capital, civic engagement, Korean immigrants, church participation, community integration

Since the 1970s, there has been a dramatic upswing of Latinos and Asians in the U.S. population (Census Reporter, 2012; Pastor, 2013). National and regional data point to the general trend of new immigrant groups changing the demographic landscape of residential communities across the United States (Lou, Lee, Guardado, & Myers, 2012; Ramakrishnan & Baldassare, 2004). Communication scholars have reported on the diverse experiences of immigrants as they settle in and adjust to the host society (e.g., Croucher, 2011; Katz, 2010; Y. Y. Kim, 2001; Ros, Gonza, Mara, & Sow, 2007). Empirical studies have taken on the task of identifying strategies for improving the lives of ethnic communities that face linguistic, cultural, or social challenges on a daily basis (e.g., Christmas & Barker, 2014; Oommen, 2014; Seo, 2011; Seo & Moon, 2013). However, challenges remain as new immigrant groups often find themselves caught in the middle—seeking survival and comfort with coethnics while navigating unfamiliar places, dealing with life uncertainties, and cohabiting urban space with strangers.

This study uses communication infrastructure theory (CIT; Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matei, 2001; Y.-C. Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006a) to examine the relationships between church participation and community

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integration among first-generation Korean immigrants attending a large Korean church in Los Angeles, California. Supplementing CIT with social capital concepts of bonding and bridging (Putnam, 2009) and observations made in the civic engagement literature on spillover effects (Beyerlein, Trinitapoli, & Adler, 2011; Handy & Greenspan, 2009; Schwadel, 2002), this study identifies individual-level church-based factors that contribute to Korean immigrants' integration into their respective local residential communities. In addition to the main effects of church-based factors on community integration outcomes, I explore the role of communication in mediating the effects of church factors on community integration. The implications of the findings are discussed in relation to the civic role of immigrant churches in multiethnic urban communities and how communication research can continue to guide scholars and practitioners seeking to understand pathways to immigrant integration. Self-administered surveys provide the data for analysis.

Why Korean Immigrants?

Ethnic Koreans in Los Angeles County make up the third largest Asian group after ethnic Chinese and Filipino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Despite overall high levels of education and economic success, reports indicate that Korean immigrants face barriers to accessing mainstream public services and resources, and have low rates of health insurance, homeownership, and language proficiency (Asian Americans Advancing Justice, 2013). Studies also point to Korean immigrants' disengagement from civic and political life (Choi, Lim, & Mitchell, 2008; Ramakrishnan & Ahmad, 2014) and low levels of neighborhood attachment and belonging (Lin, Song, & Ball-Rokeach, 2010).

In contrast, Korean immigrants' rate of church attendance is particularly high. Reporting on data from the Pew Research Center, Connor (2014) highlights Christianity as a dominant majority religion among Korean Americans. Nearly three-quarters (71%) of Korean Americans living in the United States identify themselves as Christian (61% Protestant and 10% Catholic), while 6% identify as Buddhist and 23% identify as unaffiliated. In South Korea, less than a third (29%) identify themselves as Christian, 23% as Buddhist, 46% as unaffiliated, and 2% as other religion. These numbers make a compelling statement about the central role of religion (and, in particular, the Christian church) in the everyday lives of Korean immigrants in the United States, and in the Korean immigrant community at large.

Min (1992) reports on the distinct social functions of Korean immigrant churches in the United States. Compared with the churches of earlier European immigrants, Korean immigrant churches focus more on counseling and educational services, and the immigrants' most pressing issues tend to center on family and noneconomic problems (rather than economic problems such as obtaining housing and jobs). Others have observed the general trend of Korean immigrant churches in the United States—in particular, second-generation Korean Americans—making more deliberate efforts to reach out beyond the ethnic enclave (S. Kim, 2010). Going beyond community-level trends and efforts made by the church leadership, the impact of church participation on the everyday social and communicative practices of immigrants is unexplored territory. This lack of understanding may be due to several factors, including the difficulty of recruiting and developing rapport with non-English-speaking participants; the difficulty of navigating the complex organizational structure of megachurches; and the diversity of churches in terms of size (small vs. large numbers of regular attendees), characteristics of the congregation (e.g., homogeneous vs. heterogeneous socioeconomic

backgrounds), organizational structure (e.g., hierarchical vs. flat), and different religious traditions they adhere to (e.g., Protestant vs. Catholic).

If the church plays such a central role in the everyday lives of Korean immigrants, are there particular types of activities at church that promote integration into their local residential communities? Does the church provide opportunities for developing the social support and competencies needed for its congregation to become members of a broader community? Are there individuals who reap the benefits of such opportunities more than others? These are the questions that need to be addressed.

Communication Infrastructure Theory Approach to Community Integration

Communication infrastructure theory provides an ecological model for understanding how recent immigrants become integrated into their local communities (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001). Ecological approaches, in general, sensitize us to a wider net of civic possibilities across multiple social, organizational, and institutional contexts. CIT points to locally based *storytelling agents* that increase the likelihood that diverse community members will participate in the making of an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991) and take collective action to address community problems. There are three storytelling agents in CIT that act as community resources for residents, and generate a flow of neighborhood stories and local knowledge for residents to access on a daily basis. The three storytelling agents of CIT are (1) residents who talk with neighbors, family, and friends (microlevel); (2) nonprofit organizations in the community that serve the residents (mesolevel); and (3) local media that target a specific geographic area or ethnic group (mesolevel). Together, the three storytelling agents make up a *storytelling network* that is unique to each geographically bound local community. The capacity for generating and sharing stories among the three agents is shaped by various contextual factors within that community (e.g., transportation, ethnic diversity, and public spaces).

This study measures Korean immigrants' degrees of community integration by their integrated connectedness to the storytelling network (ICSN) and levels of neighborhood belonging. Different indicators of integration have been offered by immigration scholars and policy makers. Common indicators include social cohesion, civic participation, economic well-being, and health (OECD & European Union, 2015; Pastor, Ortiz, Carter, Scoggins, & Perez, 2012). In general, the goal of these indicators is to capture the degree to which immigrants' everyday needs are met and their chances of maintaining a positive life trajectory in the host society. The current study uses two types of indicators from CIT. The first is a communicative indicator, measured by immigrants' connections to the local storytelling network. The second indicator is neighborhood belonging and captures immigrants' levels of social integration.

A community's storytelling network in CIT consists of storytelling agents—residents, local media, and community organizations—that generate and share stories about the community. When individuals are integrated into the local storytelling network, they become involved in "a generic process of constructing and reconstructing discourse about community identity, issues, and action strategies" (Y.-C. Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006a, p. 177). This is important for community integration because individuals who participate in local storytelling are more likely to position themselves as a residential member of the neighborhood. When enough residents are connected to the storytelling network, they are more likely to share a common idea about the

kind of neighborhood they live in without having to directly experience every aspect of community life or interact with every other resident.

One of the earliest conceptualizations of CIT focuses on ICSN as a pathway to neighborhood belonging and civic engagement (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001). More recent studies conducted in different neighborhood contexts have found that individuals' ICSN and levels of neighborhood belonging are positively correlated (e.g., Chen et al., 2013; Y.-C. Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006a; Liu et al., 2017). CIT defines neighborhood belonging as "an attachment to a residential area that is evidenced in everyday exchange behaviors" (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001, p. 393). Neighborhood belonging is important for collective efficacy, participation in civic action, and intergroup relations (Broad, Gonzalez, & Ball-Rokeach, 2014; Y.-C. Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006a). The relationship between ICSN and neighborhood belonging among church-attending Korean immigrants has yet to be explored.

In addition to CIT, this study draws on the concepts of bonding and bridging from the social capital literature and observations made in the civic engagement literature on spillover effects (Schwadel, 2002). The goal is to identify individual-level church-based factors that contribute to Korean immigrants' communicative (ICSN) and social (neighborhood belonging) integration into their respective local communities.

Social Capital and the Role of the Church

Faith-based associations shape social capital and civic life in the United States (Bellah, 1985; Putnam, Campbell, & Garrett, 2010; Stepick, Rey, & Mahler, 2009). In general, church-based social ties are shown to contribute to individuals' health (McDougle, Handy, Konrath, & Walk, 2013), civic engagement (Lewis, MacGregor, & Putnam, 2013), and volunteerism (C. Lim & MacGregor, 2012; Merino, 2013). Ties developed with other church members can be seen as an important form of bonding social capital (Aldrich, 2012; Putnam, 2009) via their shared membership in and identification with the goals of the church (Leonard & Bellamy, 2015). Research shows that congregation-based friendship networks are an indication of the degree to which an individual is socially and civically integrated into the congregation (McClure, 2014; Rhodes, 2012; Stroope, 2012).

For immigrants in a multiethnic neighborhood, the church is a place where ties are forged with coethnic others who share the culture and language of their home country. Megachurches are often equipped with facilities such as large meeting rooms, cafes, picnic areas, basketball courts, playgrounds, and on-site parking, which facilitate informal interactions among church members and the development of social ties. Coethnic ties have been shown to be a powerful resource during times of crises (Airriess, Li, Leong, Chen, & Keith, 2008) and to provide protective effects on health outcomes (Beaudoin, 2009). In particular, having close ties may buffer the stress of investing time and energy into forging social relationships outside the church. Having weak ties, where members are introduced to friends of friends or an acquaintance of friends, may result in a gradual expansion of immigrants' social network rooted in the local host community, with the church serving as a central hub. Thus, church-based friendship networks may increase individuals' social support and local knowledge, which in turn facilitate their communicative and social integration into the local community.

H1: Individuals' church-based social ties will have a positive effect on their connections to the local storytelling network.

H2: Individuals' church-based social ties will have a positive effect on their sense of neighborhood belonging.

Spillover Effects of Civic Participation

Faith-based groups and religious organizations generally have an open-door policy and expose individuals to the types of communication and organizational competencies needed to become participants of civil society (Eliasoph, 2011; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). The church is an important organizational context where the motivation, competencies, and actual practices related to becoming engaged community members are learned and experienced. Civically oriented behaviors and practices that are context specific and coethnic generally have spillover effects on individuals' commitment to the broader local society (Beyerlein et al., 2011; Handy & Greenspan, 2009; Schwadel, 2002). Studies that examine active forms of participation that go beyond regular worship attendance generally report a positive relationship to outcomes related to civic and political engagement (Driskell, Lyon, & Embry, 2008; Houston & Todd, 2013; Merino, 2013; Robnett & Bany, 2011). This study also captures the more active forms of participation to examine the effects on individuals' connections to the local storytelling network, and positive attitudes and behaviors towards neighbors. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: Individuals' church-based civic participation will have a positive effect on their connections to the local storytelling network.

H4: Individuals' church-based civic participation will have a positive effect on their sense of neighborhood belonging.

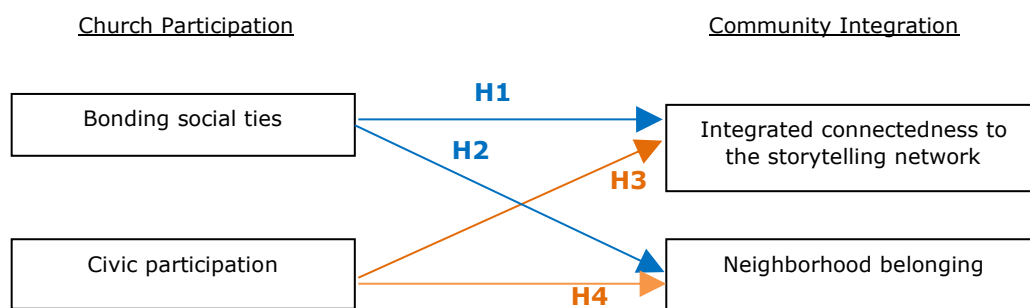


Figure 1. Hypothesized model linking church participation and community integration.

Figure 1 illustrates the hypothesized church-based individual-level factors that contribute to Korean immigrants' communicative (ICSN) and social (neighborhood belonging) integration into their respective local communities.

The Mediating Role of Communication

This section describes a communication mediation model in which Korean immigrants' ICSN mediates the effects of church participation on neighborhood belonging. In addition to the four hypotheses about the effects of church-based factors on community integration, two research questions explore the relationships among the individual church-based factors and the two community integration variables ICSN and neighborhood belonging. In addition to the main effects of church-based factors on neighborhood belonging (H2 and H4), I speculate that some of the effects may be mediated in part by ICSN. In other words, when Korean immigrants form social ties at church, they become more embedded in their local storytelling networks, which leads to an increased sense of neighborhood belonging. Likewise, when Korean immigrants take part in civic activities at church, they become more embedded in the local storytelling network, which also leads to an increased sense of neighborhood belonging.

Social ties may lead to integration into the broader society when a ripple effect over time affords members opportunities to share knowledge of community resources and at times directly assist other members in connecting to those resources. This may involve, for example, church members taking other members to their own volunteer group or sports club, pointing out a local news website they find useful, or referring them to professionals and service providers in the area.

Church civic participation may lead to integration into the broader society when the types of activities available at church motivate individuals to expand their interpersonal networks, expose them to a wider range of news sources, and help them become comfortable working with organizational staff and professionals. The function of the church may be to bring in parts of the local storytelling network for members to access in culturally sensitive ways—for example, legal or health-related workshops led by community organizations in Korean. Or it may be that the church directs people to parts of their own local storytelling resources—via development of organizational and communication competencies that members can apply in neighborhood contexts outside the church. The research questions are the following:

RQ1: Does ICSN mediate the relationship between church social ties and neighborhood belonging?

RQ2: Does ICSN mediate the relationship between church civic participation and neighborhood belonging?

Method

Study Location

The study site, Eternal Church,¹ is located in Central Los Angeles, in a zip code with a population of a little over 18,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Two-thirds (66%) of the residents are Latino, 12% are White, 15% are Asian, 6% are Black, and 1% are other. Eternal Church exemplifies a "megachurch" as defined by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research in terms of its congregation size, level of activity and services provided throughout the week, emphasis on fellowship among members, and various types of organizational activities outside worship service. Eternal Church is a church with an open-door policy and a low threshold for membership. During my informal interviews with key informants, it became clear that the church was known to many in the Korean immigrant community as a church attended by people of all socioeconomic backgrounds. Eternal Church is divided into parish groups. Each group is homogeneous in terms of age and residential location, and each group has its own set of organized activities outside regular worship service. For the purpose of this study, I examined 10 parish groups whose members reside in Los Angeles.

Survey Administration

Data for this study come from 270 surveys administered in May–June 2015 to first-generation Korean immigrants attending Eternal Church. The surveys were administered in Korean because the participants were more comfortable reading and speaking in their native language, and they attended Korean worship services. Individual survey packets were created and provided to church staff members, who then distributed the survey packets to members of the 10 parish groups. Each packet included one paper survey, a pen, and an Institutional Review Board information sheet. To keep the survey administration process consistent across the parish groups, the church staff members were provided with a recruitment script, which they read before passing out the surveys. The survey was introduced as a Korean immigrant community participation survey. The script also mentioned that participants must be 18 years old or older to participate, they must currently attend or work at Eternal Church, and participation in the survey is voluntary. Participants were also informed that their participation in the study would not impact their relationship with the church in any way. The participants completed the surveys in their own time and returned them to church staff in sealed envelopes. Those who completed the survey and provided an address were mailed a \$25 gift certificate. Of the 379 surveys distributed, 270 were completed and returned (71% response rate).

Measures

Neighborhood Belonging

The respondents' level of neighborhood belonging is captured with an eight-item "belonging index," which was developed to assess both subjective neighborly feelings and objective neighborly behaviors (see Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001, for details about how the scale was developed). The four items assessing the subjective dimensions of belonging are: "being interested in knowing what your neighbors are like" (16% of

¹ Eternal Church is a pseudonym for the study site.

respondents agreed or strongly agreed), "enjoying meeting and talking with your neighbors" (20.2% agreed or strongly agreed), "ease of becoming friends with your neighbors" (25.3% agreed or strongly agreed), and "exchanging gifts with your neighbors" (11.9% agreed or strongly agreed). Respondents used a 5-point Likert scale to answer each question: 1 = *strongly disagree*; 2 = *disagree*; 3 = *neutral*; 4 = *agree*; and 5 = *strongly agree*.

To assess objective dimensions of belonging, respondents were asked to write the number of neighbors they know to: "keep watch on their house or apartment" ($M = 2.47, SD = 1.30$), "ask for a ride" ($M = 2.91, SD = 1.36$), "talk with them about a personal problem" ($M = 2.92, SD = 1.42$), and "ask for their assistance in making a repair" ($M = 2.64, SD = 1.22$). To keep the metric consistent with the subjective dimensions, the responses were recoded into values between 1 and 5 where 1 = 0 neighbors, 2 = 1 neighbor, 3 = 2 neighbors, 4 = 3 neighbors, and 5 = 4 or more neighbors. The scores for the eight items were added to create a neighborhood belonging composite variable that ranges between 1 and 40. The mean value is 20.79 ($SD = 6.57$). Cronbach's α test for index scalability is .84. The neighborhood belonging measure has been tested in other studies with large data sets, and the measure has been reported to have high reliability (e.g., Broad et al., 2014; Y.-C. Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006b; Liu et al., 2017).

Integrated Connectedness to the Storytelling Network

ICSN is an operationalized measure for an individual's degree of connection to the local storytelling network and is composed of three variables: intensity of interpersonal neighborhood discussion, local media connectedness, and scope of community organizational membership (see Y.-C. Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006a, for a detailed description of the ICSN measure). The intensity of interpersonal neighborhood discussion was captured by two questions: "How often do you talk about the neighborhood where you live with other Koreans?" ($M = 4.42, SD = 2.52$) and "How often do you talk about the neighborhood where you live with people of other ethnicities (not Korean)?" ($M = 2.91, SD = 2.09$). For each question, respondents were asked to circle one number on a 10-point scale where 1 = *never*, and 10 = *all the time*. A synthetic variable assessing the respondent's intensity of interpersonal neighborhood discussion was created by adding the two scores (range 2 to 19, $M = 7.33, SD = 3.93$).

Local media connectedness was measured by asking respondents about how they get news related to their community. The first question asked: "How often do you get news about the community where you currently live through Korean media?" ($M = 2.81, SD = 1.05$). The second question was: "How often do you get news about the community where you currently live through English-language media?" ($M = 2.18, SD = 0.95$). For both questions, respondents used a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *never* to 5 = *always*. A synthetic variable assessing connectedness to local media was created by adding the two scores (range 2 to 10, $M = 4.98, SD = 1.68$).

Connection to community organizations was measured by asking whether the respondent or anyone in his or her family participated in the following six groups: sports or recreational (19.5%), cultural or ethnic (7.4%), educational or school related (8.9%), neighborhood specific (12.4%), political (0.8%), and others (7.8%). Each type of group a respondent participated in was assigned a value of 1. A final synthetic variable for scope of connection to community organizations was created by summing the scores for all six categories

(range 0 to 5, $M = 0.56$, $SD = 0.90$). To prevent the effects of negative skew, a dichotomous variable was created so that participation in any one of the six organizations was coded as 1 and participation in none of the six organizations was coded as 0. A little over a third (36.6%) of respondents participate in one or more organizations.

The ICSN score was calculated by summing the three interaction terms between local media connectedness, scope of connections to community organizations, and intensity of interpersonal neighborhood storytelling (Y.-C. Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006b; range 2 to 18.14, $M = 7.64$, $SD = 3.79$).

Church Social Ties

Church-based social ties was measured by the number of close friends the respondent identified at church (McClure, 2015). Following Ellison and George (1994) and Wang and Wellman's (2010) assessment of individuals' friendship network size as an indicator of the levels of social connectivity or social resources, respondents were asked: "How many people at church do you consider as your close friend?" (range 0 to 30, $M = 6.35$, $SD = 5.31$).

Church-Based Civic Participation

Respondents' scope of civic participation in church was adapted from CIT's civic participation measures (Y.-C. Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006a). The measure was created by adding the number of community-oriented and leadership activities that individuals have participated in at Eternal Church. The respondents were asked whether they had done any of the following eight activities: attended a meeting discussing issues related to the church (outside regular parish group meetings); written a letter, sent an e-mail, or talked to the parish leader, pastor, or deacon about a problem at church; posted thoughts or an opinion on the church website; helped organize an event or program at church; volunteered to help with cleaning or washing dishes at church or did volunteer work related to service or worship; volunteered to help in the surrounding community; donated money to a political, social, or charitable cause that was specifically supported by the church or the pastor; participated in missionary work organized by the church. For each item, respondents answered either yes (value = 1) or no (value = 0). The responses for the eight items were summed to create a synthetic variable assessing respondents' scope of civic participation in the church context (range 0 to 8, $M = 3.69$, $SD = 2.43$).

Control Variables

For control purposes, several sociodemographic variables were included. For income, respondents were asked to specify an estimate of their household income for the previous year. The seven response options are 1 (less than \$15,000), 2 (\$15,000 to less than \$20,000), 3 (\$20,000 to less than \$35,000), 4 (\$35,000 to less than \$45,000), 5 (\$45,000 to less than \$60,000), 6 (\$60,000 to less than \$75,000), 7 (\$75,000 to less than \$100,000), and 8 (\$100,000 or more). For education, respondents were asked to indicate their highest grade or level of school that they have completed. Response options are 1 (eighth grade or less), 2 (some high school), 3 (high school graduate), 4 (some college or technical school), 5 (college graduate), 6 (some graduate study), and 7 (graduate degree). For age, respondents were asked to give the

year of their birth. The year was subtracted from 2015 to obtain their age. Respondents' gender was coded 0 for male and 1 for female.

Results

Hypothesis Testing

Three-step hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to measure how well church social ties and civic participation predict levels of ICSN and neighborhood belonging. First, age, gender, education, and income were entered into the model as control variables. Second, church-based social ties was entered into the model. Last, church participation was entered into the model. The analyses were conducted separately for the two community integration variables ICSN and neighborhood belonging.

Predictors of ICSN

The first multiple regression analysis identifies predictors of ICSN (see Table 1). The first model including only the control variables shows that 4% of the variance in individuals' ICSN is due to control variables, $F(4, 222) = 2.331, p < .10, R^2 = .040$. In the second model, church friends did not provide a statistically significant addition to the model. In the third model, church civic participation provided a significant addition to the model ($b = .214, p < .010$). In the final model, $R^2 = .089, F(6, 220) = 3.596, p < .010$, holding constant key sociodemographic variables and the number of close friends at church, individuals' scope of church civic participation emerged as a positive predictor of their levels of ICSN.

Table 1. Predictors of Integrated Connectedness to the Storytelling Network.

	Model 1 β	Model 2 β	Model 3 β
Control variables			
Age	.051	.045	.039
Gender (male)	.048	.053	.046
Education	.202**	.204**	.178*
Income	.052	.052	.087
Church factors			
Church social ties		.083	.038
Civic participation			.214**
ΔR^2	.040	.007	.042
R^2	.040	.047	.089**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Predictors of Neighborhood Belonging

Similar steps were taken for neighborhood belonging, as shown in Table 2. The first model that includes only the control variables shows that less than 6% of the variance in individuals' neighborhood belonging is due to control variables, $F(4, 228) = 3.479, p < .01, R^2 = .058$. Age and

gender were significantly related to neighborhood belonging, whereas education and income were not significant predictors. In the second model, church social ties provided a statistically significant addition to the model, $\Delta F(5, 227) = 4.881, p < .000, \Delta R^2 = .040$. In the last model, church civic participation provided a significant addition to the model, $\Delta F(6, 226) = 5.308, p < .000, \Delta R^2 = .026$. Thus, in the final model $R^2 = .124$, both church social ties ($b = .164$) and civic participation ($b = .169$) are significant positive predictors of levels of neighborhood belonging.

Table 2. Predictors of Neighborhood Belonging.

	Model 1 β	Model 2 β	Model 3 β
Control variables			
Age	.218**	.203*	.200*
Gender (male)	.137*	.150*	.144*
Education	.128	.131	.111
Income	.043	.043	.069
Church factors			
Church social ties		.200**	.164*
Civic participation			.169*
ΔR^2	.058	.040	.026
R^2	.058**	.097***	.124**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

To summarize, H1 and H2 proposed that church social ties will positively predict ICSN and neighborhood belonging, respectively. Church social ties is a positive predictor of neighborhood belonging but not of ICSN. Thus, only H2 is supported. H3 and H4 proposed that church civic participation will positively predict ICSN and neighborhood belonging. Church civic participation is a positive predictor of both ICSN and neighborhood belonging, supporting both H3 and H4.

Research Question Findings

I used Baron and Kenny's (1986) four-step test for mediation effects to examine RQ1 and RQ2. Figure 2 presents a path diagram for mediation showing the proposed links among the independent, mediator, and outcome variables. A series of ordinary least squares regressions was conducted to establish significant links among the variables.

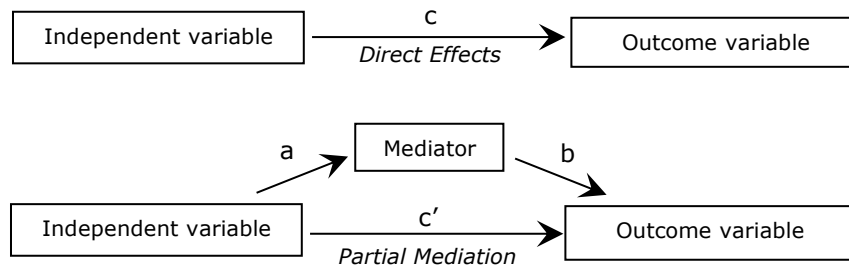


Figure 2. Path diagram for mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Research question 1 asks whether the effects of church social ties (independent variable) on neighborhood belonging (outcome variable) are mediated in part by ICSN (mediator). The four steps to establishing mediation (see Table 3) are as follows:

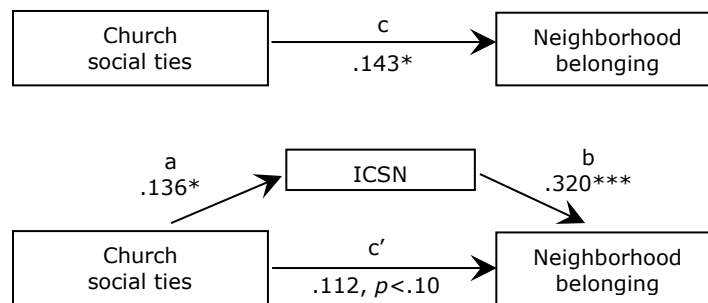
- Step 1. Church social ties is a significant predictor of neighborhood belonging ($b = .143, p = .030$; path c in Figure 2).
- Step 2. Church social ties is positively correlated with ICSN ($b = .136, p = .046$; path a).
- Step 3. ICSN is positively correlated with neighborhood belonging ($b = .320, p < .000$; path b).
- Step 4. The effect of church social ties on neighborhood belonging decreased from $b = .143$ to $b = .112$ in the presence of the mediator, ICSN, while the effect of ICSN on neighborhood belonging remains significant ($b = .276, p < .000$; path c').

Table 3. Ordinary Least Squares Regression Analysis for Mediation Paths: Social Ties.

	β			
	Path c ST > NB	Path a ST > ICSN	Path b ICSN > NB	Path c' ST + ICSN > NB
Control variables				
Age	.194*	.027	.208**	.199*
Gender (male)	.164*	.049	.127*	.151*
Education	.131	.200**	.041	.074
Income	.052	.053	.048	.052
Church social ties	.143*	.136*		.112 ($p = .084$)
ICSN			.320***	.276***
R^2	.067**	.035*	.138***	.167***

Note. ST = church social ties; NB = neighborhood belonging; ICSN = integrated connectedness to storytelling network. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The regression analysis indicates that ICSN plays a mediating role in the association between church social ties and neighborhood belonging. Figure 3 presents a path diagram for the partially mediated effects of church social ties on neighborhood belonging.



* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Figure 3. Path diagram for mediated effects of church social ties on neighborhood belonging.

Research question 2 asks whether the effects of civic participation on neighborhood belonging are mediated in part by ICSN. Again, a series of ordinary least squares regression analyses is conducted for the following four steps (see Table 4):

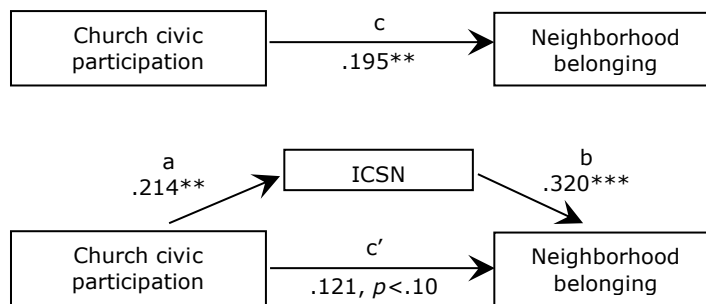
- Step 1. Church participation is a significant predictor of neighborhood belonging ($b = .195, p = .003$; path c in Figure 2).
- Step 2. Church participation is positively correlated with ICSN ($b = .214, p = .001$; path a).
- Step 3. ICSN is positively correlated with neighborhood belonging ($b = .320, p < .001$; path b).
- Step 4. The beta and significance level of church participation decreases when ICSN is added to the model, from $b = .195$ to $b = .121$, and $p = .057$. ICSN remains significant ($b = .292, p < .001$; path c').

Table 4. Ordinary Least Squares Regression Analysis for Mediation Paths: Civic Participation.

	β			
	Path c CP > NB	Path a CP > ICSN	Path b ICSN > NB	Path c' CP + ICSN > NB
Control variables				
Age	.192*	.031	.208**	.200**
Gender (male)	.136*	.056	.127*	.123
Education	.075	.163*	.041	.033
Income	.087	.062	.048	.071
Civic participation	.195**	.214**		.121 ($p = .057$)
ICSN			.320***	.292***
R^2	.087**	.075**	.138***	.167***

Note. CP = church civic participation; NB = neighborhood belonging; ICSN = integrated connectedness to storytelling network. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Evidence supports a partial mediation role of ICSN for church civic participation. In other words, the effects of church civic participation on neighborhood belonging are partially mediated by ICSN. Figure 4 presents a path diagram for the partially mediated effects of church civic participation on neighborhood belonging.



* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Figure 4. Path diagram for mediated effects of church civic participation on neighborhood belonging.

Discussion

Implications of Making Friends and Taking Action at Church

The number of friends at church was a positive predictor of immigrants' levels of social integration (neighborhood belonging) into their residential neighborhood (H1) but not a significant predictor of communicative integration (ICSN). In other words, the more church friends Korean immigrants of Eternal Church have, the more likely they are to display positive behaviors and attitudes toward their neighbors. The findings of this study indicate a gradual expansion of individuals' social network rooted in the local host community, with the church serving as a central hub of this expanding network.

We can speculate that over time, for some church attendees, their boundaries of "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991) expand to include both the church and their residential neighborhood. The idea of a more inclusive community boundary may be challenging for newcomers, especially if their residential neighborhood and the church are located in different cities, or if they live in an ethnically heterogeneous neighborhood. Nonetheless, in general, finding the right church or social group is a crucial first step to immigrants' understanding of the social structures, communication resources, and key institutions in the host society. Once the initial coethnic-based social needs are met, the church continues to act as a gateway and indirectly connects individuals to the world outside the church walls. For example, the social support and comfort from peer groups and close friends at church may act as a buffer to the stress and anxiety involved in interacting with other ethnicities in immigrants' own neighborhoods by decreasing levels of intercultural communication apprehension (Oommen, 2014).

The positive relationship between church participation and community integration (H3 and H4) further provides evidence of faith-based organizational life contributing to members' growing commitment to their communities. When members assume leadership roles, work collectively to address issues, and invest their own time and money into improving the church community, they develop the types of communication and organizational competencies that are needed to become good citizens of a community. In other words, Korean immigrants of Eternal Church learn how to come together in the church context, and this learning is transferred to their local communities.

Although frequency of attendance is a commonly used proxy for church participation, findings on the effects of frequency of attendance on civic engagement-related outcomes are inconclusive. Studies point out that attendance alone does not fully explain the effects on civic engagement, and may be moderated by type of religious traditions (Guo, Webb, Abzug, & Peck, 2013) or demographic factors such as gender (Sirin & Katsiaficas, 2011). This study went beyond frequency of attendance to examine participation in civic activities at church in addition to church-based friendship ties. Nuanced measures of church participation are important for the study of immigrant groups—such as Korean immigrants in Los Angeles—whose rate of church attendance is quite high. Thus, while it is clear that church participation

plays a key role in the overall well-being of immigrants, continued efforts need to be made to improve tools for capturing the multitude of social and communicative aspects of participation.²

Results from testing the hypotheses indicate that context-specific and coethnic forms of participation have spillover effects (Tselios, Noback, van Dijk, & McCann, 2015) into other areas of community life. Although this study focused on church participation, there may be other institutions or contexts where recent immigrants increase their chances of community integration and civic engagement. For some, family networks may be integral, particularly if immigrant children play a crucial role in connecting the parents to the host society (e.g., Katz, 2010, 2014a). For those seeking education or work in the United States, transnational networks or online communities may anchor individuals in other institutions or groups in the host community, which may or may not be related to their church participation. Schools are another possible site of involvement and collective action among immigrant parents (M. Lim, 2014; Terriquez, 2012).

The Mediating Role of Communication

The second part of the analysis examined the role of communication in mediating the effects of church factors on community integration. Flory, Loskota, and Miller's (2011) assessment of the religious ecology of Los Angeles between 1992 and 2010 suggests that, despite the efforts of some faith-based groups to engage in the public life of Los Angeles, many still function within "closed organizational systems" (p. 34). By testing the ICSN mediation model, this study puts "communication dynamics" at the center of church participation, with the goal of identifying practical strategies that can be employed "to effect change at various levels of analysis" (Katz, 2014b, p. 58). Findings from the research questions point to the central role of local communication processes in Korean immigrants' community integration. Korean immigrants' integration into the local storytelling network (ICSN) mediated the effects of church-based friendship ties on neighborhood belonging (RQ1). ICSN also mediated the effects of church-based civic participation on neighborhood belonging (RQ2). To summarize, members of Eternal Church tap into locally specific communication resources through their social ties and civic activities at church, which in turn increase their sense of belonging in their residential neighborhood.

Church-based social ties may be conducive to neighborhood belonging when the more horizontal interactions afforded by close friendship ties can encourage free-flowing exchange of neighborhood stories and connect individuals to parts of their local storytelling network—other residents, local media, and community organizations. Examples of neighborhood stories being exchanged include: where to go for sports and entertainment, cheap and healthy foods, and health services; learning how to fill out a legal form; understanding the local economy; and learning about the different ethnic groups in the area. The one-to-one social ties initiated by in-person activities organized by the church may be sustained over time via other forms of communication such as mobile messaging and phone calls. Through multiple forms of communication, members can organically generate a repertoire of community resources that can be

² This study examined church-based social ties and civically oriented activities to capture different degrees of participation in the church context among Korean immigrants. For an in-depth discussion of a more multidimensional measure of church participation and its conceptual underpinnings, see Son (2018).

tapped into to address everyday life needs. In the process of developing and sustaining social ties, church members may take another member to their own volunteer group or sports club outside church, point out a local news website or blog they find useful, or refer the member to professionals and service providers in the area.

Church-based civic activities may be conducive to neighborhood belonging when the church brings community resources inside its boundaries for members to experience in a culturally sensitive way—for example, when the church invites community organizations to hold workshops for members (e.g., related to citizenship application, financial literacy, or health services) or when local police volunteer to help manage traffic in high pedestrian areas near the church. The effects might also be indirect when the civic activities at church help members develop the motivation and skills to engage with parts of their own local storytelling network. A church member might practice civic skills by reaching out to church leaders about issues within the church community. With repeated positive and successful experience communicating with church leaders, the church member may gain the motivation to speak up in other neighborhood contexts—for example reaching out to school staff and teachers if they feel their children's needs are not being met at school.

Urban sprawl and demands for mobility in today's society will continue to pose challenges to community integration. Immigrant church participation is important for understanding the local dynamics of immigrant settlement, integration, and the specific needs and challenges of immigrant groups. The findings of this study suggest it is crucial that community leaders and groups working with new immigrant groups continue to recognize the importance of—and, in some cases, facilitate—coethnic activities and social support systems. Immigrant churches may work directly to integrate individual members into local storytelling networks by facilitating conversations about their own neighborhoods and directing members to diverse local media sources and stories. At the organizational level, churches will also benefit from trust-based relationships with other community organizations and leaders. Positive working relationships with media outlets will help increase the church's visibility in the community and disseminate information about church events and services that are open to the public. Research can also be directed at capturing the constantly changing social and communicative dynamics of church members (e.g., the size of social networks, degrees of belonging, and levels of ICSN) and understanding why some churches are better than others at connecting with other groups in the community.

Study Limitations and Future Directions

There are a few limitations in this study. First, more systematic analyses are needed to draw out aspects of the organizational structure and culture of Eternal Church that are particularly effective in facilitating members' integration into the local community. So far, field observations point to two aspects: (1) both formal and informal activities that revolve around the parish group that each member is assigned to by the church and (2) an overall emphasis on an open-door policy. Such organizational-level features may encourage certain social ties to be forged and collective activities to prevail over others. A comparative case study might examine a Korean church in Los Angeles with more organically formed parishes or subgroups.

Second, the findings of the current study point to a positive relationship between the number of friendship ties and levels of neighborhood belonging. Further research can more closely examine the nature of the ripple effects of church-based social ties on neighborhood belonging. Although the current study identified two types of social ties—church friends and residential neighbors—I have not examined the extent to which church friends and residential neighbors may (or may) not overlap for the participants (i.e. church friends live close by in the participants' neighborhood vs. having distinct and separate church friends and residential neighbors). Understanding the degree to which the individual member feels the church is part of their own neighborhood (either geographically or symbolically) might help disentangle the effects of the different *types* of social ties on community integration. In addition, more in-depth observations may be directed at understanding the different types of church participation, and the difference participation makes when the activity is communication related (e.g., reaching out to a church leader, posting on the church website), organizational (e.g., organizing an event or program, attending a meeting), or monetary (e.g., donating money to causes supported by the church).

Finally, efforts can be directed at exploring sociocultural factors of individuals who show relatively higher levels of church participation—i.e., those who are more engaged than others in church activities and leadership roles. A closer examination of sociocultural factors may reveal whether the church is truly a level playing field for all or whether church participation is experienced differently depending on individual factors such as length of residency, English proficiency, and other family members attending the same church. In addition, future studies can examine the extent to which immigrants' prior experience of civic participation in the home country shapes their likelihood of church participation and community integration in the host community.

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