

Virtual volunteering, community support, and self-care in Chinese communities in Canada

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Abstract

Objective: Our study aimed to explore the link between environment and health, driven by a virtual volunteering program, and discuss the implications of virtual volunteering in community support in the postpandemic era.

Methods: Using a purposive sampling strategy, we recruited 21 participants with diverse backgrounds, including age and sex. They participated in individual interviews of 1–2 hours, all of which followed a semistructured interview guide centered on topics, such as volunteer experiences, impacts, and understanding of volunteering. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a grounded theory approach.

Results: Our data showed that interpersonal interactions through the virtual volunteering program helped participants deal with loneliness, and boosted their mental health. The social network provided participants with social support. Moreover, activities, such as dancing, yoga, Tai Chi, and singing, facilitated physical health. Participants not only learned various skills but also served as mentors, through which they increased self-efficacy through reciprocal role transformation.

Conclusions: Our study concludes that virtual volunteer programs have a positive impact on people's physical and mental health. The participants demonstrated different levels of resilience when their environments changed. By situating virtual volunteering as the center of people's health, our findings suggest that people gain informational, instrumental, and emotional support through virtual volunteering. Future research should examine the experiences of individuals from other ethnic groups and settings to supplement this study.

Keywords: Chinese Canadian, Community support, Online space, Self-care, Virtual volunteering

Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic restricted the use of physical spaces to reduce the risk of infection. Individual and organizational activities transitioned from physical to virtual spaces. The impact of this transition has been far-reaching, significantly altering the way in which social services and community activities, represented by virtual volunteering, are expressed and engaged during the pandemic.

At the early stage of the pandemic at the beginning of 2020, Chinese communities in Canada formed self-quarantine support

groups using *WeChat* (a social media application) to help those traveling back to Canada from China, who were voluntarily isolating themselves^{1–3}. When Canada started a national-level lockdown in March, many Chinese Canadian people expanded their efforts through virtual volunteering³. One such organization is the Chinese Volunteer Association in Canada (CVAC), based in Montreal, Canada. It has mobilized volunteers to work within Chinese communities across Canada to mitigate the challenges of the pandemic. The virtual volunteering program launched by the CVAC has connected people in different places and optimized opportunities for the physical and mental health of those in need, as well as the volunteers themselves.

The CVAC was established in October 2015. Before its formal establishment in April 2015, it was founded to support a Chinese-Canadian parliamentary candidate. From April to October, the main activities at the CVAC were to support the election, with the campaign team primarily composed of Chinese-Canadian citizens. After the election, 11 volunteers responsible for campaign activities realized the various difficulties faced by new immigrants in a foreign country. To provide more services and support for Chinese-Canadian students (including new immigrants and international students), the CVAC was officially established.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, to better assist travelers from China in voluntarily self-quarantining, the CVAC has started helping them with airport pickups, finding quarantine accommodations, and purchasing necessary supplies for those who were in quarantine. After March 2020, everyone stayed

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home during the lockdown. To relieve anxiety and depression, especially among older adults, and improve their physical fitness and immunity, language, arts, and sports courses were gradually opened on Zoom. All mentors and mentees were recruited voluntarily once online courses were promoted to the Chinese community across Canada. These volunteer activities are closely related to community support^{4,5}. Participants indicated that organizations, such as the CVAC and its volunteering program, created a sense of home for the Chinese community in Canada and provided a place for people to seek support, thereby enhancing community cohesion and participation. Especially during the pandemic, the existence of such organizations made Chinese immigrants feel more secure.

Based on a case study of a virtual volunteering program organized by the CVAC, our study aimed to explore the link between the environment and health driven by such a virtual volunteering program. It discusses the implications of virtual volunteering in combination with offline volunteering for community support in the postpandemic era. This paper begins with an overview of the literature on the environment, health, community support, volunteering, and self-care. It then introduces the research design, reports the study findings, and discusses the relevant implications.

Literature review

Previous studies on immigrant volunteers emphasized the benefits of volunteering for immigrants, such as social integration and the enhancement of social and human capital. They recognized the significance of individual-level factors in influencing immigrant volunteer participation and acknowledged the importance of understanding the motivations behind immigrant volunteering. These studies highlight common ground in understanding the role and impact of volunteering on immigrants' lives. Handy and Greenspan⁶ investigated how volunteering experiences help immigrants attenuate the effects of relocation by regaining lost social and human capital. Based on an analysis of surveys, focus groups, and interviews with immigrants in ethnic congregations across 4 Canadian cities, they proposed a conceptual framework that identifies individual and organizational factors influencing volunteer participation and intensity, highlighting the benefits of volunteering for immigrants' integration into the host society. Wilson-Forsberg⁷ found that immigrants in Canada volunteered to gain Canadian experience, maintain professional identity, and alleviate loneliness and boredom; however, although volunteering could foster social integration, it did not significantly improve their economic integration.

Only a few studies have focused on the experiences of immigrant volunteers during this pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed significantly to the development of virtual volunteering and communities. Traditional in-person volunteer opportunities have become limited or have ceased alongside social distancing measures and lockdowns. In response, organizations and individuals quickly adapted to the new reality by leveraging technology to create virtual volunteer opportunities. Lachance⁸ explored the opportunities and challenges associated with implementing virtual volunteering as a leisure activity. By leveraging technology, virtual volunteering offers opportunities to create accessibility for individuals to engage in volunteer work remotely, overcoming geographical constraints⁸. This enhanced

social outcomes and contributed to the survival of organizations and events during these unprecedented times. Virtual volunteering also presents management process challenges that must be addressed effectively. Lachance highlighted the value of virtual volunteering in creating leisure opportunities, and advocated its implementation in organizations and events by leisure practitioners, both during the pandemic and in the future. Immigrants' volunteering experience during the pandemic not only plays a role in providing them with leisure opportunities but also ensures their well-being.

Furthermore, only a few studies have explored the complex ecological relationships between individuals and their environments. They have studied how immigrant volunteers interact with changing environments, communities, and themselves. The COVID-19 pandemic has created a unique context for understanding how immigrant volunteers interact with themselves, the community, and the environment. Greenspan et al⁹ indicated that by engaging in virtual or remote volunteering activities, immigrant volunteers have had to adapt to new ways of contributing and connecting with others while navigating the challenges imposed by the pandemic. These volunteers not only contribute their skills and time to support community initiatives but also engage in a process of self-reflection and personal growth, finding purpose and fulfillment in their volunteer roles⁹. In this section, we reviewed literature from 3 aspects: (1) ecological systems theory of environment and health, (2) community development, volunteering, and response to the pandemic, and (3) volunteering and self-care.

Ecological systems theory of environment and health

Ecological systems theory is a framework that emphasizes the interdependence between individuals and their environment, and how this interdependence affects health and well-being. According to Bronfenbrenner¹⁰, individuals live in and adapt to a complex network of environmental forces, including microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The microsystem represents the individual in a family setting, the mesosystem stresses the interactions between the individual and the family, the exosystem employs social structures and community-level factors that impact the individual's functioning, and the macrosystem refers to cultural and societal values, attitudes, and beliefs influencing the other systems¹⁰.

According to the ecological systems theory, an individual's health and well-being are nested in a series of environmental systems that interact with each other, with each system interacting with the individual and affecting their health and well-being¹¹. The 4 systems in ecological systems theory cover both the natural and social environments, and all settings at the individual, family, community, and societal levels. With the development of information communication technology, the virtual environment has become an indispensable space where people work and live¹². It has become our interest to explore the relationship between the virtual environment and individuals' health and understand the relationship at the individual, organizational, and structural levels.

Community development, volunteering, and response to the pandemic

Previous studies on community development and volunteering focused on how volunteer programs enhance community

development^{4,13}, volunteers' motivations for developing a community¹⁴, challenges that volunteers face in community development¹⁵, volunteers' involvement in the online community¹⁶, and volunteers' training, professionalism, and community readiness^{5,17,18}. However, few studies have paid attention to the environment and health driven by virtual volunteering.

Scholars have explored the relationships between volunteer programs, community development, health, and well-being. Bloom¹³ highlighted the importance of community-level impacts on health and wellness programs and proposed a theory of change to explain the mechanisms by which volunteers can affect change at the community level. Emery's "spiraling up" theory of change and Ripple Effect Mapping evaluation methodology were applied to assess whether volunteers expanded the community-level impacts in the case of the North Carolina Extension Master Food Volunteer program. Bloom¹³ investigated the role that volunteers play in developing a program's social capital, and the implications for the program's potential to affect community-level change. The author highlighted the need for a new evaluation methodology to assess these changes, and the importance of engaging the community in health and wellness programs¹³. Scholars have explored the relationships among volunteers, community development, health, and the environment. Bakibinga et al¹⁹ explored the experiences of Community Health Volunteers, health workers, and managers in implementing a mobile health application in Kenya. They argued that the barriers to using mobile health applications from the perspectives of volunteers and community development included the socio-political environment, attitudes and behavior, issues related to the system, and poor infrastructure. The authors highlighted the importance of considering readiness for information and communication in community development¹⁹.

With the impact of the pandemic, many researchers have begun to focus on the role of community volunteers and their effective deployment. Miao et al²⁰ analyzed individual and collaborative service activities based on usage data from 85,699 COVID-19 volunteers gathered through China's leading digital volunteering platform. They found that collaboration among local citizens, civil society, and regional government is valuable in filling gaps in public services. Experienced local volunteers played a key role in rapidly shifting their focus to COVID-19 from other causes as the pandemic peaked. The authors highlight an example of state-led coproduction based on long-term relationships. Their research sheds light on how volunteerism and coproduction played a crucial role in China's response to the pandemic and provides a means to support not only the response to COVID-19 but also future crises by better utilizing human capital and technology to enhance community service delivery.

The pandemic not only brought challenges to volunteers and community development but also opportunities for virtual volunteering programs and digital volunteering practices. Cardoso Pinto et al²¹ compared the value of online and in-person volunteering at the Imperial College School of Medicine Teddy Bear Hospital, a student-led group that educates school pupils about healthy lifestyles and health care. The authors sent out questionnaires to undergraduate university students who volunteered with Imperial College School of Medicine-Teddy Bear Hospital between 2019 and 2022, evaluating their experiences of

online and in-person volunteering. They found that, although both of these had substantial benefits, most teachers and volunteers preferred in-person volunteering. They believed that interaction and engagement between pupils and volunteers were more readily achieved in person. They further indicated that a greater sense of community was established and that in-person volunteering helped volunteers feel a part of the community. However, they highlighted that online sessions were more convenient for volunteers at risk of screen fatigue. While an increasing number of virtual volunteer programs emerged after the pandemic, scholars began to explore volunteers' motivations. Khuzaiyah and colleagues investigated the correlation between educational level, knowledge, motivation, and volunteer performance in developing educator volunteers for COVID-19 in Indonesia. They found that motivation was significantly correlated with volunteer performance, whereas educational level and knowledge were not²². The authors suggested that providing full support for volunteers is crucial in motivating them to carry out their roles as educator volunteers in COVID-19.

Volunteering and self-care

Self-care refers to individual responsibilities for healthy lifestyle behaviors required for human development and functioning, as well as those activities required for coping with health conditions²³. The Canadian Mental Health Association phrases self-care as "caring for your mental and emotional needs, physical needs, social needs, spiritual needs, practical needs and intellectual needs"²⁴.

Riegel et al²⁵ explored the current state of self-care and proposed an agenda for future research. They identified 7 major reasons why self-care is challenging, which included attachment to unhealthy behaviors, lack of motivation to change, difficulty deciding when to adopt a healthy lifestyle, difficulty in maintaining healthy behavior over time, multimorbidity, inadequate response to symptoms, and life events that interact with illness. According to the authors, multiple terms are used as synonyms for self-care, including self-management, self-monitoring, and self-help²⁵. As self-care has the beneficial effects of improved well-being and reduced health care costs, it is prioritized by individuals, families, and communities²⁵.

Only a few studies have focused on volunteering and self-care. Cañas-Lerma et al²⁶ explored the impact of volunteering on the emotions and self-care practices of volunteers who provided care and support to people experiencing illness or loneliness. The study used a mixed, exploratory, and sequential design with a quantitative survey of 216 volunteers, followed by qualitative focus group discussions. It found that volunteers experienced positive emotions, such as engagement and compassion satisfaction, as well as negative emotions, such as compassion fatigue, which can be emotionally exhausting. The current study emphasized the need for volunteers to prioritize self-care practices to maintain their well-being while providing care and support to others. We explored how volunteering can enhance self-care through a community-based volunteering program. In this study, we narrowed the scope of "environment" to a community environment, a social environment where restricted physical spaces were allowed after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the concept of "health" referred to individuals' physical and psychological well-being.

Methods

Participants

We recruited 21 participants from a CVAC virtual volunteering program. As we aimed to understand the volunteers' experience during the COVID-19 pandemic through the CVAC volunteering program, we recruited participants who (1) were 18 years and above and (2) had participated in the program before or were participating during our study. They were recruited through a purposive sampling strategy to ensure diversity of backgrounds in terms of age, sex, religion, immigration status in Canada, length of life in Canada, and roles and responsibilities in the volunteering program. As the volunteers participating in the CVAC program were all of Chinese origin and self-identified as Chinese, all of the participants we recruited were Chinese as well. Seven participants were recruited in the initial recruitment and were interviewed in May 2022. In addition, a snowball sampling strategy was employed based on the initial group of participants to help recruit more participants. Subsequently, 9 participants were recruited and interviewed between June 2022 and July 2022; finally, 5 were recruited and interviewed in September 2022. Participants were aged 27–83 years and had lived in Canada for 0–48 years (2 participants had visiting/touring status in Canada but did not live in Canada; 1 participant had no status in Canada and lived in other countries). Of the 21 participants, 14 identified as females. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics. This study was approved by the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board for research involving human participants.

Procedure

All interviews were conducted on Zoom. Each interview lasted for 1–2 hours, which followed a semistructured interview guide centered on topics, such as volunteer experiences, impacts, and understanding of volunteering. After each interview, the interviewers organized reflective notes to record their observations of nonverbal expressions and thoughts. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in Chinese. The selected quotes were translated into English and back-translated to ensure accuracy. All the interviewers were members of the university research team and did not participate in the volunteering program. Two lead interviewers—1 associate professor in sociology and 1 PhD student in social work—conducted the interviews with the help of a research assistant (RA). All RAs received training in conducting qualitative research, including collecting and analyzing interview data.

Interviewees' responses can be affected by the interviewers' reactions, and the power differences between them^{27,28}. During the interviews, participants worried about their opinions toward CVAC, and that the volunteering program would affect their received services. Therefore, when screening participants, the RAs explained the interviewers' role, the purpose of the study, and the meaning of participation in the interviews. The consent form mentioned the confidentiality of participation and the use of interview data. At the beginning of each interview, the interviewers reviewed the consent form with the participants and reaffirmed that participating in the interview would not jeopardize service use, employment, or organizational interests. Finally, open research themes and questions were designed, and various values and standpoints toward the same issue were

Table 1
Sample demographics.

	N (%)
Age	
25–34	2 (9.5)
35–44	1 (4.8)
45–54	6 (28.6)
55–64	6 (28.6)
≥ 65	6 (28.6)
Sex	
Female	14 (66.7)
Male	7 (33.3)
Marital status	
Unmarried	6 (28.6)
Married	15 (71.4)
Education	
Elementary school and below	1 (4.8)
High school	2 (9.5)
College	3 (14.3)
University	9 (42.9)
Postgraduate and above	6 (28.6)
Employment status	
Contract/part-time	2 (9.5)
Full-time employed	3 (14.3)
Retired	7 (33.3)
Self-employed	7 (33.3)
Unemployed	2 (9.5)
Religion	
Buddhism	4 (19.1)
Christian	4 (19.1)
No religion	13 (61.9)
Immigration status in Canada	
Citizen	11 (52.4)
Permanent resident	7 (33.3)
Other (visiting, work permit, or no status)	2 (9.5)
Years of living in Canada (y)	
0–9	8 (38.1)
10–19	7 (33.3)
20–29	3 (14.3)
≥ 30	3 (14.3)

acceptable. The interviewers avoided asking leading questions and sought clarification from the participants if they did not understand their points. In addition, the lead interviewers and all RAs were required to complete reflection notes about their own stance and the interview process, which were analyzed during the data analysis stage.

Data analyses

The data were analyzed through a grounded theory approach²⁹ because of the exploratory nature of this study. This approach is the systematic generation of theory from data grounded in the lived experience of participants³⁰. Different from other qualitative methods, the grounded theory approach develops knowledge through constantly comparing data with their analyses to create knowledge that participants identify as relevant, rather than merely verifying a preexisting hypothesis held by the researchers³⁰. Oktay³¹ described this approach as “designed to create theories that were empirically derived from real-world situations.” As the understanding and experience of participating in CVAC's volunteering program have been undefined, the

grounded theory method could provide a way to investigate participants' experiences and perspectives to create meaning.

Guided by this approach, the data analysis process started when approximately half of the data were gathered, and the later stage of sampling was informed by the analysis to achieve data saturation (the point where additional data did not provide new information)²⁹. Our research team members read the transcripts independently and discussed the transcripts and coding strategies. Initial codes were developed and refined after open coding; examples of initial codes included "making new friends makes me happy," "we share information on everything," "I learned how to dance," and "I feel proud of myself now." The initial codes were grouped into 4 themes: "strengthened social networks," "information sharing," "new skills learning," and "self-efficacy and self-actualization." The study's findings are organized based on these themes in the following section. All data were analyzed using NVivo qualitative research software.

Results

In this section, we explore how the CVAC and its virtual volunteering program responded to the pandemic to understand the link between the environment and health driven by the program. We found that volunteers practiced self-care by strengthening their social networks, sharing information, learning new skills, and achieving self-efficacy and self-actualization. Therefore, through volunteer activities, Chinese immigrants in the community can be organized in various ways to learn, exercise, improve their immune systems, and keep themselves active, which helps promote community development.

Strengthened social network

Social connections and interactions with others are vital for health. The absence of social connections is defined as social isolation that increases the risk of physical and mental health and mortality³². Our participants indicated that virtual volunteering was a major means to connect with the outside world:

"The pandemic has separated us, so using Zoom (to interact) makes people feel that we are closer to each other." [Participant 04 (P04); female, 50]

Moreover, establishing social networks was both a motivation and impact of participating in virtual volunteer activities during the pandemic. Some participants explained that their purpose for joining the volunteer program was to know more people. For example, P20 said that as most of her friends were in China, she wanted to build new social networks in Canada through virtual volunteer activities, and she made many friends through these activities:

"Most of my friends are in China, but now many of my friends are in Canada. We have become good friends although we have not met each other in person. We trust each other very much." (P20; female, 83)

Several participants discussed the impact of their new social networks. In general, the individuals helped and supported each other materially and mentally. For example, P13 (female, 58) mentioned that if someone was sick, other people would help

deliver medicine. P06 (female, 59) said that after she helped others, she would receive homegrown vegetables as gifts. In addition to material gains, online volunteer activities and expanded social networks positively impacted participants' mental health. Some participants mentioned that interacting with people online made them happy. For instance, P12 (female, 50) believed that helping others helped oneself. Furthermore, this positive impact on mental health was more significant than usual during the pandemic. Some participants highlighted that although the pandemic made them feel more stressed, isolated, and lonelier, volunteer work helped them effectively cope with these negative feelings.

"Because of the pandemic, we spend more time at home. However, you cannot bear to stay (home) for quite a long time. People feel distressed, and you hope to communicate with others. We human beings are such emotional animals. We need to communicate to feel better. When you feel unhappy or lonely in daily life, there is no connection and interaction (during the pandemic). Then, the best way now is the online community like what we have created. We created this online volunteer community, and this is the most helpful thing for us." (P09; male, 50)

Therefore, when the pandemic increased the need for self-care and improved health conditions, the virtual volunteering program provided people with a platform to establish social networks with others. Accordingly, through established online activities and social networks, most participants made new friends, which had positive impacts during the pandemic in terms of material life and physical and mental health.

Information sharing

In addition to establishing social networks, organizations and virtual volunteer activities allow people to share various types of information. Information sharing through online platforms was another mechanism by which people took care of themselves during the pandemic. For example, P13 (female, 58) mentioned that many people shared information about the pandemic and helped them deal with their illness. Despite receiving information about the pandemic and illness, some participants mentioned that they asked and answered different questions about various aspects of life. P21 said that other volunteers helped her in applying for a health insurance card and obtaining a driver's license. More importantly, she mentioned that when she saw other people sharing information and helping her, she also helped others subsequently:

"It is what we said, 'we have found the group/organization.' People using the same language (Chinese) will tell you where to get your health care card, how to apply, and how to get a driver's license. Other people have helped me in the past, and I might also help others in the same way in the future." (P21; female, 47)

New skills learning

CVAC offers a wide variety of online courses with reasonable difficulty classifications, making it easy for individuals with various backgrounds to join. According to P07's (male, 62) introduction, the courses encompassed a diverse range of categories, including language classes (eg, English, French, and Chinese

dialects), health classes (diet and health, virus education, and epidemic prevention knowledge), physical classes (dancing, yoga, and Tai Chi), and art classes (musical instruments and painting).

In addition, some participants mentioned that online lecturing enhanced their proficiency in digital media and improved their skills in using technological devices and communication software:

“Through volunteering, we also learned how to record videos and operate Zoom, such as how to share screens and collect data from the participants because we need to keep track of the number of attendees and upload the information. We had never used these tools before, so it is important for us to keep updating our skills and learning.” (P05; female, 68)

Volunteers who assumed the role of mentors in online classrooms greatly enhanced their pedagogical and soft skills. For mentors who primarily relied on traditional teaching methods, their pedagogical experience expanded through virtual and hybrid learning modes and helped improve the overall quality of teaching:

“I believe that I have accumulated a lot of knowledge in online teaching methods because there are some differences between online and offline methods. This experience has helped me to further improve my teaching skills.” (P15; female, 37)

Furthermore, some participants stated that they learned about the use of online learning management systems and improved their capacity for online course design, organization, delivery, and assessment, which enhanced their overall knowledge of creating digital instructional materials:

“I was not good at making things on the computer. Through this experience, I pushed myself to learn how to do it. They praised me for creating a beautiful poster, and it gave me more confidence and a sense of accomplishment.” (P04; female, 50)

Self-efficacy and self-actualization

Many participants (especially volunteer mentors) believed that volunteer organizations, such as the CVAC, were good platforms that allowed them to showcase their expertise and interests. In addition to material benefits, their selfless contributions made them more satisfied. When volunteers were recognized, respected, and/or understood by others, they felt that their contributions were recognized, which enhanced their self-efficacy and self-fulfillment:

“At the same time, I also gain mental satisfaction because as a teacher, I hope to be recognized, liked, and praised by others: ‘Oh, your content is so wonderful’. Do not we all feel warm in our hearts when we hear this? If you do not do anything, who will give you this kind of recognition? So I think this is very good. So I am willing to do this.” (P09; male, 50)

Through volunteering, our participants acquired new skills and knowledge, which not only made them happy and confident but also added more possibilities for their future. Learning new skills, trying new things, helping others, and achieving success

through volunteer activities made many seniors feel confident and proud:

“I also feel very pleased with myself for the achievements. I think, ‘Oh, I am already this age, and I can handle this matter well. My brain is still functioning well.’ So, when I do something and realize that I still have the ability to do it, my reactions are still okay (laughs), and my brain can still process things, although it may be slower. So, this also gives me more confidence in myself.” (P20; female, 83)

In conclusion, participating in volunteer activities not only made our participants happy and fulfilled but also enhanced their self-efficacy and self-fulfillment. By helping others, learning new skills, and showcasing their expertise and interests, they not only contributed to the community but also improved their abilities and confidence, making their lives more fulfilling and meaningful.

Discussion

Our study highlights the profound correlation between the environment and health, specifically through the implementation of a virtual volunteering program. Given the macro-context shift caused by the pandemic and subsequent social isolation policies, communities have embraced organized virtual volunteering as a means of social support to foster self-care within the micro-system, thereby yielding significant physical and mental health benefits.

Impacts of the changes in the environment on health

These findings emphasize the ability of meso-level community organizations to respond promptly and effectively to macro-level public health crises, particularly by providing crucial social support during periods of self-quarantine. This was evident in the case of the CVAC, which proactively facilitated self-quarantine even before the government made self-isolation mandatory. As the pandemic progressed and government policy was implemented, the CVAC took advantage of its existing human and material resources, proactively extended its service scope, and switched its services from offline assistance in self-isolation to online activities with the assistance of new technologies. Through the implementation of virtual volunteering programs during the pandemic, the CVAC offered valuable resources, such as virtual health information, physical exercise routines, educational opportunities, and entertainment options. By providing material support to pay attention to people’s mental health, CVAC has demonstrated efficient and effective community support to respond to environmental changes¹³. This kind of community support brings a sense of belonging, making people feel a part of the community, thereby enhancing their sense of self-value and self-satisfaction²⁰. This showcased the capacity to address the needs of individuals and foster well-being in times of crisis.

Changes in the environment due to the pandemic have increased the demand for physical and mental self-care. Thus, people must take care of themselves more effectively in various ways. Participants indicated that virtual volunteering provided them with platforms to establish the necessary social networks during the pandemic. Previous research has shown that people tend to be more anxious and depressed during the pandemic due to isolation; thus connections with others become essential²¹.

Over half of the participants directly expressed that they had made many new friends who became very important during the pandemic. Moreover, the participants indicated that establishing social networks positively influenced their lives and health in various ways.

In addition to offering help and support, our participants learned new skills and knowledge by participating in a virtual volunteering program, ultimately realizing self-achievement and improving their self-efficacy. During the pandemic, through the online volunteering services provided by the CVAC, with a focus on online teaching and learning, both volunteer students and teachers acquired new skills. Our participants, who were primarily students in the online classroom, reported that they acquired professional knowledge and social, organizational, management, and statistical skills through the learning process. The participants who were teachers felt recognized, respected, and understood by others, which made them feel happy and satisfied, further enhancing their confidence and sense of fulfillment.

Cross-cultural perspective of volunteering and self-care

Research has shown that over 67.5% of Chinese immigrants have never participated in any type of volunteer work³³, and we argue that the low participation rate is related to Chinese cultures and perceptions regarding volunteering. The Chinese culture of volunteerism has a rich history and is deeply rooted in the Confucian principles of social harmony, compassion, and community responsibility. Volunteering in China is often considered a moral duty and a way to contribute to the collective well-being. Traditional values, such as “guanxi” (relationships) and “renqing,” (favor) play a significant role, as volunteering is often driven by personal connections and reciprocal relationships within the community. Chinese volunteers engage in a wide range of activities, including disaster relief, environmental conservation, education, health care support, and community development. With the rapid modernization and globalization of China, volunteerism has evolved, embracing innovative approaches, such as online volunteering platforms and corporate social responsibility initiatives. The Chinese culture of volunteerism continues to thrive, promoting social cohesion, fostering community engagement, and making meaningful contributions to the country’s social progress.

While this culture contributes to Chinese immigrants’ participation in volunteer activities in Canada, it offers valuable insights and lessons for cross-cultural perspectives on care practices. Chinese immigrants bring a deep-rooted tradition of community involvement and a strong sense of social responsibility. By engaging in volunteer activities, Chinese-Canadian individuals and organizations contribute to the well-being of both the Chinese community and the wider Canadian society. This cultural approach promotes social cohesion, builds trust, and fosters a sense of belonging among Chinese immigrants.

Most participants concluded that participating in volunteer activities helps others help themselves. While the notion of self-care may be narrowly applied to people with chronic or acute illnesses in medicine and health studies, we defined a broader concept of self-care, which refers to the activities and practices that individuals engage in to promote their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Thus, self-care can include a wide range of activities, such as getting enough sleep, eating a healthy diet,

engaging in physical exercise, practicing mindfulness or meditation, spending time with loved ones, pursuing hobbies or interests, and seeking professional help when needed. Given the prediction that “self-care will become the primary source of care”³⁴, examining self-care practices through volunteer initiatives organized by community organizations becomes critically important, particularly when specialized care encounters challenges during times of global crises.

Limitations

This study has a few challenges and weaknesses, many of which stem from the qualitative design of the fieldwork and data collection. First, the participants were not randomly selected. This study aimed to understand the experiences of CVAC volunteers who were unlikely to be identified by interviewing a random sample. The qualitative approach allowed participants to share their lived experiences more freely and allowed us to explore them further. In addition, this study presents the findings of a case study on a Chinese-Canadian volunteer organization; therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to other parts of Canada or other countries. However, the results for organizations with similar objectives, cultural backgrounds, and community contexts are still relevant and valuable in terms of designing and delivering volunteer services.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that organized virtual volunteering positively affects individuals’ physical and mental health during a macro-level public health crisis, by providing social support and facilitating self-care at the community level. When their environments changed, the participants began to find other ways of adapting to the new environment. Our findings suggest that people gain informational, instrumental, and emotional support through virtual volunteering. Through active volunteer activities, by strengthening social networks, sharing information, learning new skills, and achieving self-efficacy and self-actualization, individuals engage in self-care practices that enhance their physical and mental well-being. The findings suggest that virtual volunteering can complement offline volunteering efforts in community support. Our study provides insights into the potential of virtual volunteering as an effective strategy for community support and self-care.

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Conflict of interest disclosures

The authors declare that they have no financial conflict of interest with regard to the content of this report.

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