

Availability of COVID-19 information for international residents living in Japan – An examination of local government and international exchange association websites –

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Abstract

【Purpose】

This study aimed to review the websites of local governments and international exchange associations to analyze the current COVID-19-related information available for international residents living in Japan.

【Methods】

This study was conducted from June 2020 to October 2020. The COVID-19 online information from 47 prefectures and the 64 representative international exchange associations was reviewed. The contents of that online information were coded according to four predetermined categories, and then the data was analyzed descriptively using Excel. Statistical calculations were made based on the language types used to convey the COVID-19 information, types of institutions or organizations that provide consulting services, types of institutions or organizations to which external links on the website led, and the types of information distribution media.

【Results】

The local government provided international residents living in Japan with information involving viruses and diseases (95.7%), the Japanese government reaction to COVID-19-related issues (89.4%), everyday life in Japan (83.0%), and overseas (19.1%). By contrast, information from international exchange organizations involved more everyday life information (56.3%) and overseas information (20.3%). Among the multilingual COVID-19-related information from 47 prefectures, the ten most used languages (except Japanese) are English, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Portuguese, Spanish, Thai, Indonesian, French, Russian, and Tagalog. The types of institutions or organizations that provided consulting services and external links on the prefectural homepages can be categorized as local level, national level, and others. For media sources, all prefectures provided international residents related COVID-19 information on the official HP. However, international exchange associations adopted diversified approach to convey COVID-19 information to international residents such as HP (92.19%), Facebook (81.25%), Twitter (20.31%), as well as Line, blogs, and Instagram (9.38%).

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【Conclusion】

The prefectures and international exchange associations provided international residents with COVID-19 information in diverse contents, multiple languages, and multiple methods.

Key words : International residents, COVID-19 information, Japan

I. Introduction

As of October, 2020, the World Health Organization has reported a total 37,704,153 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 1,079,029 deaths (WHO, 2020). This global epidemic has impacted the lives of 91% of the world's population currently living in countries that have imposed restrictions on international travel (Connor, 2020). In Japan, these conditions have profoundly affected the daily lives, work, and even lifestyles of the country's foreign residents. For international residents who lack the sufficient social support in Japan typically provided by friends and family, these restrictions on travel have made them more vulnerable. It has become essential for them to be able to obtain the necessary information related to COVID-19 if they are to maintain their physical and mental health during the pandemic. In order to explore the current status of information available to international residents during this time, we decided to review the homepages (HP) of prefecture governments and online information provided by local international exchange associations to examine the materials provided specifically to international residents living in Japan and related to COVID-19.

II. The purpose of this study

The purpose of this study was to get an overview of the current status of information provision regarding the COVID-19 pandemic targeted at international residents in Japan. The results will assist local governments and international exchange associations in adopting appropriate methods to provide disaster information for international residents and offer evidence for developing a disaster information transmission system for international residents in the future.

III. Methods

1. Data collection method

The research data collection period was from June 2020 to October 2020. The target subject for data collection was the COVID-19 online information from 47 prefectures and the 64 representative international exchange associations in each prefecture. In this study, the term "local governments" refers to the 47 prefectures in Japan. The 47 prefectures consist of 43 prefectures proper, two urban prefectures (Osaka and Kyoto), one "circuit" or "territory" (Hokkaido), and one "metropolis" (Tokyo). For the purpose of this study, "international exchange association" was defined as a public corporation or organization supported by a local government that aims to promote cultural exchanges between Japan and the world, and provides support for local international residents including consulting services for residence procedures, work and life, Japanese learning support, and organizing exchange activities between Japanese and international residents (depending on the policies of each prefecture, the duty and nature may vary) (Hokkaido Foreign Resident Support Center, n.d.; Kyoto City International Foundation, n.d.; Osaka International House Foundation, n.d.).

We visited the official websites of the 47 prefectures and the official websites or SNS official accounts of 64 representative international exchange organizations in each prefecture. This study adopted two researchers to collect data. Researcher UM was responsible for collecting data, researcher TY was responsible for checking the collected data and data analysis. This study used the following four approaches to collect data: ① The researcher visited the official websites. Then the COVID-19 special webpage was accessed. After reading all the contents on the special webpage, the categories of information provided to international residents were recorded. ② For the HPs which had not set up a special webpage for COVID-19, the

researcher searched information released from December 2019 to October 2020 and extracted the information with keywords “foreigners”, and “COVID-19/new coronavirus” for analysis. Then the categories of information provided to international residents were recorded. ③ For the organizations which mainly utilized SNS to post information, the researcher visited their official SNS accounts such as Facebook accounts. The information released from December 2019 to October 2020 was searched to record the categories of information provided to international residents. ④ For the websites that used automatic translation technology, the researcher checked the automatically translated COVID-19 related information in English and Chinese. The information that could be translated was also recorded as the categories of information provided to international residents. Because the frequency of updating COVID-19-related information on each website was different, therefore, this study decided to collect data updated before October 1, 2020, and on October 1, 2020, all collected data was checked.

2. Data analysis method

The information regarding contents, languages, consultation service, and outside links, medium of information provision on COVID-19 for international residents provided online were extracted. The coding of the extracted data was done based on the categorization frame developed by the research team. Based on previous findings of disaster studies, the initial categorization frame was developed. Then the research team composed of experts specializing in disaster nursing and information sciences modified the initial categorization frame to fit the COVID-19 pandemic situation. The categories related to COVID-19 information and the contents contained in each category are described as follows:

1) Virus and Diseases: About COVID-19 virus; Number of the cases and deaths in Japan; Number of

the cases and deaths in other countries; Symptoms and treatments; Infection prevention and measures; About clinics and hospitals in Japan

- 2) Japanese Government Reaction: Government actions (ex: statement of emergency) ; Immigration restrictions in Japan; Financial support such as benefits and scholarships; Unemployment allowance and support payment; Employment consultation
- 3) Everyday Life in Japan: Temporary closure of facilities; Operation of schools and nurseries; Event cancellation; Public transportation within Japan; Visa information; Interpretation service
- 4) Overseas: Travel safety information; Immigration restriction of each country

According to the predetermined categories and their descriptions, if the online resource provided the information in one category, then it was recorded as “1” under this category; otherwise, it would be recorded as “0”. For instance, if the HP of Osaka prefecture provided information explaining the health impacts of COVID-19 on the individual, then for Osaka prefecture under the category “Virus and Diseases” a “1” would be recorded. Descriptive statistical analysis was also performed using Excel to calculate frequency, mean, median and standard deviation. The languages used to convey COVID-19 information, COVID-19 information about consultation services and outside links, and COVID-19 information dissemination media were also analyzed. The language data was extracted from 47 prefecture HPs. The data regarding consultation services and outside links, and information media were collected from 47 prefecture HPs and the official websites or SNS official accounts of 64 representative international exchange associations.

3. Ethical considerations

The data collected in this study was all public information found online. This research did not involve the use of any private information related to individuals. This research also did not directly copy, quote, or

misappropriate the content on the websites, only the content of the information published on the website was analyzed. All the data collected in this study was anonymized so it was ensured that the prefectures or international exchange associations cannot be identified.

IV. Results

1. The contents of COVID-19 information

Table 1 shows the contents of COVID-19 information from prefectures and international exchange associations. Japan's local governments and the local international exchanges associations provided diverse information on COVID-19 for international residents. The local government mainly provided international residents with information involving viruses and diseases (95.7%) , the Japanese government's reaction (89.4%) , and everyday life in Japan (83.0%) . However, there was relatively little information about overseas issues (19.1%) .

The data in Table 1 reveals that the information from international exchange associations has a similar pattern as prefectures. However, the information provided by these two kinds of organizations was different in some aspects, especially in the information regarding everyday life in Japan and overseas. In terms of daily life information, 57.4% of local governments and 20.3% of the international exchange associations provided information on the reopening of public facilities, operation of schools and nurseries, and event cancellation. However, international exchange

associations provided more diversified daily life information. 53.1% of associations provided multilingual consulting services on daily life issues, while only 8.5% of the prefectures provided daily life consultations for international residents. For overseas information, 9.4% of international exchange associations were active in publishing the latest immigration policies, such as entry or travel restrictions. On the other hand, only 4.3% of the local governments provided such information, and the rest only provided relevant links.

Besides, by comparing the statistics of COVID-19 information contents from two sources, it was found that information from the local governments was mainly concentrated in three categories (virus and diseases, Japanese government reaction, and everyday life in Japan) , and information from the international exchange association was mainly concentrated in two categories (virus and diseases, and Japanese government reaction) (see table 1) . For example, the contents covered more by the governments than by the international exchange association were the information about everyday life in Japan (83.0% and 56.3%, respectively) , followed by information regarding virus and diseases (95.7% and 73.4%, respectively) . The broader coverage of information by the prefectures can be found in disease-related information and Japanese government reaction information, but some specific information for foreigners was rather covered by the international exchange association. For example, in terms of information about Japanese learning materials for

Table 1 The contents of COVID-19 information from prefectures and international exchange associations

		Prefectures (n=47)	International Exchange Associations (n=64)
Categories	Virus and Diseases	45 (95.7%)	47 (73.4%)
	Japanese government Reaction	42 (89.4%)	56 (87.5%)
	Everyday Life in Japan	39 (83.0%)	36 (56.3%)
	Overseas	9 (19.1%)	13 (20.3%)
Statistic data	Mean	2.87	2.38
	Median	3	2
	SD	.90	.92

seeking medical help (Disease-related information) and employment support for foreigners (Japanese government reaction) , the proportion of prefectures providing Japanese learning materials for seeking medical help (2.1%, 9.4%) and employment support information for foreigners (10.6%, 42.2%) is lower than that of the international exchange associations.

2. Languages of the COVID-19 information

Most of the 47 prefectures provided multilingual COVID-19-related information on their HPs. The ten most used languages (except Japanese) were English, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Portuguese, Spanish, Thai, Indonesian, French, Russian, and Tagalog (see Table 2) .

In addition, 31.91% of local governments used easy Japanese to convey information to international residents. At the same time, 68.09% of local government used automatic translation technology on their HPs. In particular, 16 prefectural HPs used Google translation technology. What is more, five local governments had adopted AI technology on their HPs to set up a floating window called a COVID-19 Q&A, allowing visitors to use multiple languages (including Japanese, English, Chinese, Korean and Thai) to ask questions. However, 45 prefectures provided international residents with COVID-19 related

information in multiple languages on their HPs. Two prefectures outsourced the task of providing multilingual online information about COVID-19 to the local international exchange associations.

3. COVID-19 information related consultation services and outside links

In addition to multilingual COVID-19 information, the consulting services and COVID-19-related external links were also provided by the prefectures and international exchange associations. 43 prefectures provided COVID-19 multilingual counseling services for international residents, while the remaining four prefectures did not specifically state on their HPs that whether the multilingual counseling services were provided for international residents. Some local governments had multilingual counseling centers for COVID-19 and provided the telephone number and consultation center address on their HPs. Some prefecture governments had not set up local multilingual counseling centers but provided external links to multilingual counseling services in the COVID-19 pandemic. The institutions and organizations that provided multilingual consulting services include local, national, and non-governmental organizations (see Table 3 for details) .

In addition, the consulting services were conducted through various approaches including telephone, face-to-face discussions, emails, faxes, and online seminars. Translation support services proved to be another way to provide international residents with COVID-19 consultation. This refers to the volunteer translation services through which volunteers help international residents contact medical institutions or government departments, and which provide real-time interpretation in multiple languages over the phone.

Related links or external sites provided by the prefectures and international exchange associations mostly can be categorized as local links, national links, and others (see Table 3 for details) .

Table 2 Languages of the COVID-19 information

Ranking	Language	Count number (n=47)
1	English	45
2	Chinese	42
3	Korean	36
4	Vietnamese	30
5	Portuguese	25
6	Spanish	20
7	Thai	20
8	Indonesian	20
9	French	18
10	Russian	16
10	Tagalog	16
11	Easy Japanese	15

Table 3 Consultation services and outside links

	Local	National	Others
Institutions or organizations that provide consulting services	International exchange departments of prefectural or municipal government, local international exchange associations, local international medical institutions, etc.	Foreign Residents Support Center (FRESC) of The Ministry of Justice, Multilingual Visitor Hotline (24H) of Japan National Tourism Organization, etc.	AMDA International Medical Information Center, Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR), etc.
Institutions or organizations to which the external links on the website led	Local health departments, medical institutions, local international exchange organization websites, etc.	Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Cabinet Secretariat, Japan National Tourism Organization, etc.	AMDA International Medical Information Center, Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR), National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Japanese Association for Infectious Diseases, NHK World-JAPAN, WHO, etc.

4. The COVID-19 information dissemination media

The 47 prefectures mainly provided international residents with COVID-19 information on their official HPs. By contrast, international exchange associations had adopted more diversified approaches to sending COVID-19 information to international residents. Most of the 64 international exchange associations surveyed in this study used their HP (92.19%) and Facebook (81.25%) as their main methods to provide information. In addition, some international exchange associations also used Twitter (20.31%) and Line, blog, Instagram (9.38%) to provide information.

V. Discussion

1. Diverse contents of the information

Prefectures and international exchange associations both provided international residents with diverse information emphasizing on different aspects. The previous study which investigated the information available on local government websites to support international residents in disasters stated that online information only included multilingual disaster preparedness manual or disaster map, daily live guide

in disaster, and so on (Fujita, 2018). However, this study found that the COVID-19 information for international residents covered more diverse contents including viruses and diseases, Japanese government reaction, everyday life in Japan and overseas. In addition, the analysis results of information contents in this study are consistent with the study by Kawasaki, Henry, and Meguro (2018) which found that, after an earthquake, international residents mainly searched for information included disaster characteristics and damage, government response, evacuation and shelters, and daily life information like food and water supply, electricity utilities, etc.

This study analyzed the COVID-19 information from prefectures and international exchange associations separately, and the results revealed that government-sourced information was more comprehensive and more focused on information about viruses and diseases, government response and everyday life, while the information from international exchange associations were more fragmented and involved more everyday life information and overseas information. Since all local governments had set up special COVID-19 web pages to release information in different categories, the information they provide was

more integrated. The more comprehensive coverage of information by the government may also be due to their use of automatic translation; 68.09% of the prefectures applied automatic translation to their whole website originally developed for local Japanese residents. However, whether the automatic translation of governmental webpage could meet the information needs of foreigners is still worth exploring. Because this arrangement may have created a difficult situation for international residents where the information irrelevant to local Japanese, such as multilingual medical assistance, support measures for international residents, and immigration rules, were deficient. For instance, although with automatic translation services, the percentage of prefecture HPs that provided Japanese learning materials for seeking medical help (2.1%), employment support information for foreigners (10.6%), multilingual daily life consultation services (8.5%), and latest immigration policies (4.3%) were not high. On the other hand, even although not all of the international exchange associations set up a special webpage to sort the COVID-19 information into categories, there were a relatively higher proportion of international exchange associations kept releasing the latest information for international residents, such as information regarding Japanese learning materials for seeking medical help (9.4%), employment support information for foreigners (42.2%), multilingual daily life consultation services (53.1%), the latest immigration policies (9.4%) and so on. This indicates that the international exchange center had more opportunities to communicate with international residents and could better understand their information needs, so it could provide international residents with information that meets their needs more flexibly. The government has more resources to cover the broader range of information released for international residents, and the international exchange associations interact more closely with international residents and can grasp the

information needs of international residents. Therefore, the local government and the local international exchange centers needed to engage in cooperation and integrate both of their own information resources to help international residents obtain the information more efficiently.

2. Multilingual information available

The language used by various institutions or organizations for information translation demonstrated consistency with the data on the number of foreign residents in Japan. According to census data from the portal site of official statistics of Japan (2012), the top 10 countries or regions of origin of international residents were China (1044278), Korea (485257), Vietnam (418625), Philippines (329465), Brazil (214643), Taiwan (125435), USA (119173), Thailand (111841), Nepal (99866), Indonesia (96497). The data suggests that a large number of Chinese, Koreans, and Vietnamese are living in Japan, which explains why in addition to English, most prefectures and international exchange associations chose to use Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese to provide information to international residents.

This research also revealed a trend toward the use of supplying COVID-19 information in clear, easy-to-understand Japanese. Fujita (2018) pointed out that 22% of the local government introduced easy Japanese in providing disaster-related information to international residents, and this study found that 31.91% of prefectures used easy Japanese. Moreover, Kawasaki et al. (2018)'s survey illustrated that most international residents living in Japan were able to basically understand the information in Japanese. So, providing COVID-19 information in easy Japanese will be more useful for international residents especially for those who use minor languages.

Moreover, this research found that automatic translation was widely used. Automatic translation had been widely employed in health and disaster settings

(Dew, Turner, Choi, Bosold, & Kirchoff, 2018) . This technology helps international residents understand the latest Japanese information in a timely manner. However, there were some problems with automatic translation, especially when translating information that focuses on supporting local Japanese residents. For example, after translating the information about COVID-19 consultation services for local Japanese residents, international residents might be confused about the consultation services were available only in Japanese or also accessible for non-Japanese speaking residents.

In addition to using more conventional automatic translation services, five local governments set up floating windows on their HPs using AI technology to help visitors' access to COVID-19 information. Visitors could input questions in Japanese, English, Chinese, and other languages and would get answers in seconds. This technology was demonstrated to be a significant help for website visitors, especially international residents, who were seeking local COVID-19 information in different languages. This research demonstrated that, in the future, the proper use of computer technology and translation technology will allow people from different countries and regions to access disaster-related information easily, accurately, and in a timely manner.

3. Various consultation services and outside links

Consulting services for international residents offered a channel for international residents to directly communicate with medical staffs, government agency employees, or volunteers to obtain the information they needed. In particular, international residents might not have a good understanding of the Japanese medical system, and Japanese medical terminology was also difficult for international residents to understand. Therefore, during the COVID-19 epidemic, multilingual consultation services could help international residents

obtain local medical information or other information they need. By offering information, such consulting services could also help international residents to deal with the problems they encountered, and alleviate their anxiety and fear. The provision of external links to various COVID-19 information resources made it easier for international residents to find the information they needed. For example, most prefecture-level HPs did not provide information on the entry or re-entry of foreign nationals but did provide a link to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan for international residents to find such information by themselves. Prefecture HPs focused on providing local COVID-19-related data, local response measures, etc., so national and international COVID-19-related information or news were provided as external links.

4. Multiple methods for information dissemination

Websites are the main channel used by local governments to release COVID-19 information, and all of the 47 prefectures had set up COVID-19 special web pages. Publishing information on the website helped to display all the related information in an orderly manner, and prefectures all set special webpage for COVID-19. So, it was convenient for international residents to search and locate information.

Compared with the prefectures, international exchange associations preferred to employ multiple methods to release COVID-19 information. In addition to using their respective HPs, the international exchange associations also utilized social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Line, etc., to publish COVID-19 information. Studies have shown that social media is regarded as a reliable and immediate method of disseminating information in disasters; in particular, Facebook is popular among foreign communities (Peary, Shaw, & Takeuchi, 2012) . As a result, depending on multiple social media enabled the international exchange associations to reach out to international residents more widely and distribute the

latest news more quickly. However, the use of multiple media like SNS also has some drawbacks. Since it was difficult to set up a special webpage for COVID-19 on SNS, only 64.06% of the international exchange associations provided a special webpage for COVID-19, so international residents could quickly find the latest news about COVID-19, but it would be difficult to find previously released information.

5. Limitations

This study was based on public information related to COVID-19 published online, and only reviewed the online information of the prefecture HPs and the international exchange associations as of October 1, 2020. After that time, the contents of the COVID-19 related information, translation technology, foreign languages provided, etc., might have been updated. Moreover, this study stated that some prefectures did not directly provide international residents with multilingual information related to COVID-19. This was only the result of reviewing the prefectural HPs. We did not contact the prefectural governments for further confirmation or to explore the reasons. Besides, reviewing the webpages of municipality and ordinance-designated cities would provide a more comprehensive view of information provision by public sectors. Finally, this report only reviewed the COVID-19-related information provided online and did not investigate the information needs of international residents. In the next step, the research team will conduct a survey on the information needs of international residents during the COVID-19 period.

VI. Conclusion

In this study, COVID-19 online information available for international residents living in Japan was reviewed. The prefectures and international exchange associations provided international residents with COVID-19 information in diverse contents, multiple

languages, and multiple methods, which illustrated Japan's great efforts in supporting international residents in disaster. Examination of the gap between the information needs and availability of international residents will be the next step. The results will contribute to developing a disaster information dissemination system for international residents with a special focus on information related to health and welfare.

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Conflicts of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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COVID-19に関して外国人が利用できる情報の現状

－ 地方自治体および国際交流協会のウェブサイトの調査－

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要 旨

【目的】

本研究の目的は、地方自治体および国際交流協会がウェブ上で発信している、在日外国人が入手可能なCOVID-19関連の情報を分析することである。

【方法】

本研究は2020年6月から2020年10月の間に実施した。47都道府県および64の代表的な国際交流協会のCOVID-19に関するオンライン情報を調査した。該当する情報の内容は、まず4つのカテゴリーに分類した上で、記述的に分析された。①情報コンテンツの分類②COVID-19情報を提供するために用いられた言語の種類③相談サービスを提供する施設または機関の種類、およびウェブサイト外部リンク先の施設または機関の種類④情報配信メディアの種類。

【結果】

地方自治体は在日外国人に対してウィルスおよび疾病（95.7%）、日本政府の対応（89.4%）、日本での日常生活（83.0%）ならびに海外（19.1%）に関わる情報を提供していた。国際交流協会が提供する情報は日常生活情報（56.3%）および海外情報（20.3%）により多く関わるものであった。47都道府県の多言語新型コロナウイルス関連情報の内、最も多く使用された10の言語（日本語を除く）は英語、中国語、韓国語、ベトナム語、ポルトガル語、スペイン語、タイ語、インドネシア語、フランス語、ロシア語およびタガログ語であった。相談サービスおよび都道府県ホームページ上での外部リンクを提供していた施設または機関の種類は地方レベル、全国レベルおよびその他というように分類できた。情報発信メディアについては、すべての都道府県がその公式ホームページ上で外国人に対してCOVID-19に関連する情報を提供していた。しかし、国際交流協会は多様な手法を用いて在住外国人にCOVID-19情報を提供していた。具体的には、ホームページ（92.19%）、フェイスブック（81.25%）、ツイッター（20.31%）に加えてLINE、ブログ、インスタグラム（9.38%）等である。

【結論】

都道府県および国際交流協会は在住外国人に対してCOVID-19情報を多様な内容、複数の言語および複数の方法で提供していた。

キーワード：外国人、COVID-19情報、日本

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