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# Ethnicity and Informality: *Employment Practices in Korean Wholesale Shops in the Argentine Garment Industry*

Jihye KIM

**Abstract**

*The prevalent concentration of certain immigrant groups in the apparel sector has led to the misconception that ethnic or cultural characteristics are the sole determinants of the industry's informal business and employment practices. This research seeks to explore how informal employment practices have emerged and evolved within the Korean wholesale sector of the Argentine garment industry, challenging the notion that these practices are solely a result of ethnicity. Utilizing ethnographic research conducted in Argentina, the study shows that strong government policies and regulations regarding formal employment, as well as distinct working styles and cultures between Koreans and Argentines, have prompted Korean employers to adopt formal management practices with their Argentine employees. In contrast, they often prefer informal, trust-based labor relations with co-ethnic employees, relying on non-contractual employment arrangements. Additionally, the study reveals that Argentine entrepreneurs also exhibit a high degree of informality in employment, indicating that informal practices are not exclusive to immigrants or specific ethnic groups within the sector. The findings suggest that ethnic business practices and performances should be seen as the result of a complex interplay of individual, ethnic, and contextual factors, intricately intertwined with broader economic, social, and political conditions, rather than being simply categorized as* formal *or* informal.

**Keywords:** Korean business, Argentine garment industry, informality, ethnicity, employment

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Jihye KIM is a lecturer in Korean Studies at the University of Melbourne. E-mail: jihye.kim@unimelb.edu.au.

## Introduction

The global garment industry stands out as one of the largest informal sectors. Numerous previous studies (Waldinger 1984, 1986; Morokvasic 1987, 1988, 1993; Bonacich 1990; Bonacich et al. 1994; Rath 2002; Green 1997; Light et al. 1999; Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000; Rogerson 2001, 2004, 2006; Light and Ojeda 2002; Buechler 2003, 2004; Chin 2005; Light 2006; Panayiotopoulos 2006, 2010) have highlighted the crucial role immigrants have played in shaping the garment industry worldwide. The bulk of research has focused on immigrant entrepreneurs, the immigrant workforce, and their informal activities predominantly within garment manufacturing. This emphasis mirrors the dominant pattern observed in major cities of the Northern Hemisphere like New York, Los Angeles, Amsterdam, Paris, and Berlin. In these urban centers, many immigrant entrepreneurs function as contractors or subcontractors in the industry's lower tiers. Regulatory bodies and law enforcement often turn a blind eye as these entrepreneurs flout rules, hire undocumented immigrants, pay them off the record, and evade taxes (Rath 2002, 1). The informal practices pervasive in garment production are closely tied to governmental regulations and oversight, as evidenced by previous studies (Light and Ojeda 2002; Rath 2002; Light 2006; Panayiotopoulos 2006, 2010).

Similar to global trends, Argentina's garment manufacturing sector is characterized by its informal practices. However, the circumstances and environment in which the Argentine clothing industry operates differ from those in developed nations, as there is a significant level of informality not only in production but also in the commercial sector. Korean entrepreneurs in the Argentine garment wholesale sector are no exceptions; they also engage informally in diverse aspects of their businesses. Specifically, they undertake a wide array of tasks such as design, manufacturing, sales, employment, importation, and tax handling in a semi-formal way (Kim 2021).

The informal economy encompasses the illicit production and distribution of lawful goods and services, exemplified by activities like sweatshop textile and apparel manufacturing (Castells and Portes 1989, 14–15). Immigrants

play a central role in the literature on the informal economy, particularly within the garment manufacturing sector (Bonacich 1990; Bonacich et al. 1994; Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000; Rath 2002; Light 2006; Panayiotopoulos 2006, 2010). Scholars investigating the informal economy (Kloosterman et al. 1999; Rath 2000; Jones et al. 2004, 2006) have proposed that broader economic and political contexts, such as regulatory patterns and structural economic changes, obstruct formal economy entry, fostering informal employment and entrepreneurship opportunities. Efforts to elucidate variations in the prevalence of informal activities among different immigrant groups point to these dynamics and other factors like migration networks (Light 2006).

Previous research indicates that collaboration among immigrants from the same country is crucial for their survival and business growth (Min 1996; Light and Gold 2000; Light and Bonacich 1991). Facing discrimination, disadvantages, and other challenges in the host society, immigrants frequently depend on ethnic networks and solidarity to build communities, launch businesses, and navigate obstacles (Min 1996; Light and Gold 2000). These *ethnic resources* developed and shared within the same ethnic group, provide critical support for initiating businesses and securing job opportunities (Light and Gold 2000). As a result, immigrants or ethnic groups often become concentrated in specific sectors.

A notable issue arises when these concentrated sectors are characterized by high levels of informality. This is particularly evident among Korean and Bolivian immigrants in the Argentine garment industry. In the 1990s, the rapid growth of businesses operated by Korean immigrants was accompanied by media reports highlighting severe labor conditions, sometimes described as akin to slavery, in certain workshops (Bialogorski 2004; Bialogorski and Bargman 1996). While such practices are less common among Korean immigrants today, they continue to face criticism for their informal operations (Montero 2012; Dewey 2020). However, as this article will demonstrate, these informal management practices are not unique to Korean immigrants but are also prevalent among local Argentine entrepreneurs in the same sector. This article aims to illuminate how this situation is largely a consequence of the sector's inherently informal nature, influenced by broader economic, social, and political factors, and intricately intertwined

with individual, cultural and ethnic issues. Furthermore, despite the notable presence of immigrant entrepreneurs and workers in the informal economy, recent scholars argue against a strong correlation between ethnicity and participation in informal economic activities (Portes and Sassen-Koob 1987; Williams 2004, 2007; Jones et al. 2006; Ojo et al. 2013). Thus, it is vital to distinguish and clarify the concepts of ethnicity and informality.

Following the above argument, this research aims to explore how informal practices have been shaped and created in an environment that goes beyond the ethnicity of employers and employees in Korean wholesale businesses in the Argentine garment industry. By taking into account that such outcomes cannot properly be attributed exclusively to ethnic business practices, but also to structural sectoral and institutional frameworks, combined with other issues, such as ethnic and other available resources and relationships, I pay special attention to complexities in how employment practices in Korean wholesale businesses have been constructed and shaped within a range of individual, ethnic, and larger structural contexts rather than focusing exclusively on the informal management activities themselves.

This study aims to explore several key questions: (1) What are the primary employment patterns and labor divisions within Korean wholesale businesses in the Argentine garment industry? (2) What factors, beyond the ethnic backgrounds of employees, have influenced the development of informal employment management systems in these businesses? (3) What circumstances have facilitated or obstructed the establishment of informal employment practices in the Argentine garment industry's wholesale sector? The study specifically investigates how formal and informal practices develop when Korean employers interact with both co-ethnic and non-co-ethnic employees, in comparison to Argentine entrepreneurs. By examining these dynamics, the study seeks to understand how complex issues, relationships, and activities are intricately intertwined with broader economic, social, and political conditions, rather than being merely categorized as *formal* or *informal*.

## Research Methods

The current study builds upon my previous research, which examined the concentration of Korean immigrants in the Argentine garment industry through interviews and participant observation conducted between February and June 2014 (Kim 2020, 2021). The findings of that earlier research provided valuable insights for the present study on employment practices in Korean immigrant businesses.

Between 2019 and 2022, I conducted follow-up research focusing specifically on the experiences and opinions of Korean immigrants regarding their employment practices. While some interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom or WhatsApp in 2020 and 2021, during field research in 2022 I was able to conduct face-to-face, in-depth interviews and direct conversations. This proved particularly helpful in verifying previous data and incorporating recent changes in the sector, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Being a native Korean and fluent in Spanish greatly facilitated the conduct of this research. I employed snowball sampling to recruit participants, where existing participants assisted in finding additional participants from their social networks. With my background as a Korean immigrant who has lived and worked in Argentina, I found it much easier to approach interviewees, particularly Korean immigrants, and achieve a nuanced interpretation of interview data. Gathering information about informal management and employment issues can be challenging without obtaining the confidence of the interviewees, but many of my interviewees were willing to share their experiences and perspectives with me.

My Korean friends directly involved in the garment industry and my connections with representatives of community associations proved invaluable in obtaining detailed information on informality and employment issues. While the primary focus was on active Korean-Argentine entrepreneurs, I intentionally sought to include entrepreneurs and employees from other ethnic groups to gather a diverse range of experiences and opinions on employment practices in the Argentine garment industry.

Utilizing ethnographic methods, I paid close attention to the specific issues and factors that the interviewees themselves considered crucial regarding employment practices in Korean wholesale businesses. I primarily conducted semi-structured and open-ended interviews to encourage participants to freely express their experiences and opinions. During the interviews, I guided participants toward the research questions. The interviews typically lasted one to two hours and were audio-recorded and transcribed in the same language in which they were conducted.

I conducted thematic analysis (Creswell and Creswell 2018) by systematically categorizing and organizing the data into detailed themes and topics. Initially, I identified themes using insights from previous research and my own understanding of the subject matter. Subsequently, I employed NVivo, a qualitative analysis software, to meticulously review my field data and classify it according to these pre-established themes. In addition to the predetermined themes, I also remained open to identifying emerging themes from the field research. I thoroughly examined the various aspects of these emerging themes and evaluated their significance. Finally, I revisited each thematic area, exploring connections to theoretical explanations and considering the limitations of existing theories. Throughout the data analysis process, I reviewed each interview in its original language. Only specific statements that I intended to include in this article were translated into English.

## Theoretical Frameworks on Informality and Ethnicity

Previous scholars holding classical views of *informality* have typically employed a strict analytical division between formal (regulated) and informal (unregulated) activities (De Soto 2007; Portes and Haller 2010; Williams and Windebank 2004). Within this framework, they often interchange the term "informal" with descriptors like "black," "shadow," "underground," "subterranean," "irregular," "hidden," "clandestine," and similar terms. As a result, all informal economic activities are commonly perceived as negative, destructive, illegal, and problematic. Moreover, this

dichotomy presents challenges by oversimplifying economic activities into either formal or informal categories, portraying the latter negatively and the former positively. Consequently, this narrow and simplistic analytical distinction between formal and informal economies limits our understanding of how business practices and performances are actually influenced and reshaped by various circumstances within larger structural, economic, and institutional contexts.

Other scholars with more progressive views argue against the simplistic and one-dimensional classification of all economic activities into formal and informal categories (AlSayyad and Roy 2004; Williams 2004, 2007; Williams and Windebank 2004; Jones et al. 2006; Ojo et al. 2013). AlSayyad and Roy highlight that urban informality stems from "a process of structuration that establishes the rules of the game, determining the nature of transactions between individuals and institutions and within institutions. If formality operates through the fixing of value, then informality operates through the constant negotiability of value" (AlSayyad and Roy 2004, 5). In essence, this conceptualization suggests that urban informality represents a coherent way of life in an era of liberalization, where "the organizing divide is not so much that between formality and informality as the differentiation that exists within informality—that which marks off different types of informal accumulation and informal politics" (AlSayyad and Roy 2004, 5). Consequently, organizing and classifying complex economic activities and issues under strict black-and-white categories becomes challenging. Recent scholars addressing new divisions, segmentations, and contradictions raise serious questions about the ongoing problems with and usefulness of maintaining a simple-and-fast analytic dichotomous distinction between formal and informal economies. Instead, they advocate for replacing black-and-white categories with a range that encompasses all shades of grey.

With this new theoretical approach to urban informality, valuable analytical tools are employed to understand practices within the Argentine garment industry. These tools are particularly useful for examining the wholesale garment area around Avellaneda Avenue, Buenos Aires, where most Korean immigrants engage in semi-formal economic activities, blending formal and informal practices. The perspectives and experiences of

Korean entrepreneurs in the sector illustrate how formality and informality can be intertwined, making it challenging to clearly distinguish one from the other. Therefore, this research argues that the Argentine garment industry exhibits a complex spectrum of economic activities characterized by a combination of factors, rendering simplistic and one-dimensional approaches irrelevant.

According to Kloosterman et al. (1999, 257–258), informal economic activities take place outside the institutional frameworks of rules and regulations. Moreover, informal economic practices are clearly linked to the social capital of ethnic groups, because those informal activities take place on a more permanent basis if a framework of trust exists (Kloosterman et al. 1999, 262). In particular, I use and apply the concept of mixed embeddedness to understand the immigrants' business entry and management and further business development in the informal sector, a phenomenon that is closely linked with government regulation and control. This concept recognizes the crucial significance of immigrant social capital and ethnic resources in the entry into and operation of immigrant enterprises, but also places them together with the wider social, economic, and political contexts of the host country as explanatory factors (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Kloosterman et al. 1999; Barrett et al. 2001; Kloosterman and Rath 2001, 2003; Barrett et al. 2002; Rath 2002; Panayiotopoulos 2006, 2010; Kloosterman 2010; Cain and Spoonley 2013). Additionally, these scholars have suggested that these informal economic activities are evidence of the dynamic interaction between different domains of embeddedness; thus, they argued that mixed embeddedness is a superior tool for understanding immigrant business and informal economic activities.

## Korean Immigration and Ethnic Entrepreneurship in Argentina

The initial wave of Korean immigrants arrived in Argentina in 1965 as part of a government initiative aimed at boosting the country's agricultural output. They were resettled in the province of Rio Negro in southern Argentina and provided with previously uncultivated land to cultivate (Jeon 1996, 62).

However, given that many of the Korean migrants came from white-collar backgrounds, they encountered difficulties in adapting to the demanding nature of agricultural work. Despite support and encouragement from the Korean government, a lack of adequate economic resources and experience in agricultural production and business resulted in feelings of frustration, resentment, and dissatisfaction with their lives in Rio Negro (Park 2013). Consequently, a large portion of these early Korean immigrants abandoned farm ownership in southern Argentina and relocated to the capital city, Buenos Aires (Lee 1992, 130–134; Son 2007, 163–164). Their inability to thrive in rural agrarian life inadvertently unveiled a new opportunity for them and for subsequent waves of immigrants.

Upon settling in Buenos Aires, the Korean immigrants swiftly directed their economic activities towards the knitting and sewing industry, either working as subcontractors for Jewish-owned factories or engaging in self-employment to produce apparel in the city's slum areas. As emphasized by numerous scholars in migration studies (Light and Bonacich 1991; Light and Gold 2000; Light and Rosenstein 1995; Min 1984, 1996; Waldinger et al. 1990; Barrett et al. 1996), the unfavorable local labor market, particularly due to language barriers in the new country, was the primary reason for the self-employment of the first generation of Koreans in Argentina. For those in the early stages of immigration, garment sewing and knitting subcontracted work emerged as one of the most viable options, as it could be carried out without significant language skills or capital investment. Moreover, co-ethnic networks facilitated the efficient transmission of necessary skills and the distribution of tasks, materials, and opportunities (Kim 2020, 2021). Additionally, due to its labor-intensive nature and vertical structure, the garment industry offered diverse job opportunities, ease of business entry, and dynamic economic prospects (Morokvasic 1987, 1993; Waldinger 1984, 1986; Green 1997). Hence, the pathways undertaken by Korean immigrants in the early stages are quite common and resemble the ways in which many immigrants engage with the clothing production sector in other countries.

Korean immigrants in Argentina did not confine themselves to the demanding and financially unattractive sewing and knitting jobs for long. With the accumulation of experience and capital, as well as establishing

a secure foothold in the industry, Koreans transitioned into garment manufacturing and the wholesale and retail sectors, where higher returns awaited (Kim 2020, 2021). Undoubtedly, Koreans leveraged their co-ethnic networks effectively to expand their businesses. During the 1980s and 1990s, a significant number of Korean-owned factories supplying finished clothing exclusively to co-ethnic retailers and wholesalers operated without official registration. Many Korean Argentines in the industry viewed these unofficial factories as crucial off-the-books resources for business growth (Kim 2020, 2021). Additionally, the informal Korean co-ethnic credit system, known as *gye*, was cited as a significant and convenient financial resource for business building and expansion, particularly into larger commercial sectors (Kim 2020, 2021). However, reliance on such informal and unofficial ethnically based resources can also have negative repercussions (Kim 2020, 2021). Economic instability in Argentina, exemplified by the recession and inflation of the 1980s and 1990s, could exacerbate the inherent insecurity of informal credit systems. For instance, during periods of high inflation, some *gye* members avoided loan repayment, and retailers sometimes dishonored checks deliberately.

The Korean community in Argentina continued to experience steady growth into the early twenty-first century. During the 1980s and 1990s, a significant number of Koreans arrived in Argentina as a new category of immigrant investors, bringing substantial capital and entrepreneurial vigor to the existing Korean community in Buenos Aires. Currently, over twenty thousand ethnic Koreans reside in Argentina, with approximately eighty percent of them involved in the garment industry. While a smaller portion operates subcontracted workshops or retail stores, a considerable number of ethnic Koreans are concentrated in the wholesale sector. Korean-Argentine entrepreneurs have effectively managed both the production and distribution aspects of the apparel industry, displacing the previously dominant Jewish community and securing a prominent position in the mid-range garment market. In recent times, Bolivian immigrants, who previously constituted the majority of the workforce in Korean sewing workshops, have transitioned into production roles as workshop owners or manufacturers. Additionally, some have expanded into distribution activities by acquiring

wholesale shops in garment districts or small shops in open markets. This gradual shift and increased shared portion of the commercial sector among Bolivian immigrants have raised concerns among some Korean immigrants in the sector.

## Employment Patterns and Ethnic Divisions in Korean Wholesale Garment Shops

Currently, middle- and large-scale Korean enterprises in Argentina manage intricate production and distribution operations, encompassing both cutting factories and wholesale shops (Kim 2014, 2021). These wholesale establishments not only distribute clothing wholesale but also undertake garment manufacturing. Owners of these enterprises frequently travel to Europe or the United States two or three times a year to monitor emerging fashion trends, procuring samples to replicate in their Argentine factories. Some wholesalers even hire designers to develop manufacturing patterns. Subsequently, they acquire textiles and employ personnel to cut the fabric. Typically, the spaces where these cutters work are located on the second or third floor of the wholesale shop. Alternatively, they may be situated in separate buildings, often nearby (Kim 2021).

The employment patterns in Korean wholesale businesses vary in terms of worker ethnicity. While competition between Korean wholesalers is robust and their management styles vary depending on the owners' preferences and strategies, I observed a general tendency in the employment management strategies of comprehensive Korean wholesale shops regarding the ethnicity of the workers.

In comprehensive Korean wholesale shops, a dedicated cutting room is typically staffed by Argentines or Latin American immigrants (Kim 2021). Once the cutting process is complete, the materials are forwarded to subcontracted workshops, often owned by Koreans or Bolivians, where predominantly Bolivian workers handle the sewing and assembly tasks (Kim 2021). Some of these workshops specialize in intricate procedures such as attaching buttons, ironing, and detailed finishing (Kim 2021).

For larger-scale wholesale shops, Korean owners often enlist 1.5- or second-generation male Korean Argentines as factory managers (known as 'encargados' in Spanish). These managers are responsible for task allocation, material cutting, and may supervise the quality and quantity of sewn garments between the cutting factory and subcontracted sweatshops (Kim 2021). In some instances, Korean wholesalers opt to hire Bolivian factory managers to oversee production in Bolivian sweatshops. One interviewee noted that since all subcontracted sweatshops were Bolivian-owned and operated, hiring a proven, reliable Bolivian manager was more effective.

Furthermore, large-scale Korean wholesale shops typically appoint young 1.5- or second-generation Korean Argentines who are fluent in both Spanish and Korean as shop managers (Kim 2021). These managers often handle cashier duties and supervise local employees. Some Korean entrepreneurs with large-scale businesses operate multiple shops under the same brand name, primarily in the Avellaneda Avenue wholesale area. These entrepreneurs often hire Argentine designers familiar with local trends, sometimes traveling abroad with their Korean employers to select new designs (Kim 2021). Large wholesale business owners usually employ up to 30 employees, including those in cutting factories.

In medium-sized wholesale shops, Korean owners often serve as both cashiers and managers, while also hiring additional shop assistants as required. On the other hand, Korean proprietors of small shops situated in shopping arcades or malls (referred to as 'galerías' in Spanish) typically oversee booths or kiosks spanning four to six square meters (Kim 2021). These smaller establishments primarily focus on buying and reselling clothing from other manufacturers, rather than engaging in apparel production (Kim 2021). In such cases, owners usually manage all operational aspects independently, though they may occasionally enlist one or two shop assistants for shift work. Irrespective of the business's scale, Korean owners commonly enlist local Argentines as shop assistants, as they are adept at communicating with the local clientele. However, for roles involving cash handling, such as cashiers or managers, Korean proprietors often prefer hiring fellow Koreans due to the heightened trust and familiarity among co-ethnics, particularly in matters pertaining to financial transactions.

Korean entrepreneurs strategically navigate ambiguous areas, leveraging their resources to maximize profits and minimize costs in a fiercely competitive market. By thoroughly examining the concept of mixed embeddedness (Kloosterman et al. 1999; Barrett et al. 2001; Kloosterman and Rath 2001, 2003; Barrett et al. 2002; Rath 2002; Panayiotopoulos 2006, 2010; Kloosterman 2010), I illustrate how they manage their businesses within these gray areas. Specifically, I delve into how Koreans handle the employment dynamics of workers from diverse ethnic backgrounds, addressing various issues that arise and exploring the different economic activities and levels of informality that emerge in these complex environments, contingent upon the social actors involved.

## Local Employees: The Most Troublesome Issue in Managing Korean Wholesale Businesses

According to my interviewees, operating businesses amidst the complex and volatile social and economic circumstances in Argentina required them to navigate unfamiliar territory. Particularly managing local employees proved to be one of the most troublesome aspects. While a significant number of Korean wholesalers formally hire local Argentine shop assistants, they reported in interviews that this practice presents one of the most annoying and troubling challenges they face. This sentiment is echoed in the interview excerpt below:

> I think the problem [between employers and employees] is caused by miscommunication. And there are also some employees with bad intentions. Some people come to work and abuse them [the strong labor laws] intentionally, but there are also many good people. Anyway, it is not easy to hire new people.[1]

1. Korean-Argentine female, 51 years old (migrated in 1986), interview by author, March 27, 2014 (Kim 2021, 116). All translations are the author's.

Similar views were repeated in numerous interviews with Korean wholesalers. While government control is loose and corruption is rampant in the garment sector, labor laws in Argentina are quite solid in terms of protecting and favoring the position of workers. Korean employers attribute their frequent conflicts with local Argentine employees to these laws, perceiving their employees as using Argentina's strict labor laws as a shield (Kim 2021). Additionally, they attribute conflicts to miscommunication and misunderstandings caused by language problems and different working cultures between Argentines and Koreans (Kim 2021).

Economic activities by immigrant or ethnic groups take place within a wider institutional context, and to a large extent, this institutional context determines the shape of entrepreneurial management and operations (Kloosterman et al. 1999, 262). Unlike in Korea, labor laws and regulations in Argentina are very strict. Workers can demand and claim their rights, and the government strongly supports and sides with workers. Particularly, retaining informal workers for a lengthy period is risky for Korean entrepreneurs because they may have to pay higher penalties and compensation for the duration of their informal employment in case of legal conflicts. For these reasons, Korean entrepreneurs tend to hire local Argentine employees on a formal basis. These formal practices for local employees show that strict law enforcement tends to affect entrepreneurial management and operations on a formal level, as suggested by the concept of mixed embeddedness (Kloosterman et al. 1999). Thus, despite the high social security contributions, it is rare to find Korean wholesalers who hire Argentine shop assistants 100 percent informally, except for small kiosks in shopping malls. Typically, the riskiest type of employment arrangement an employer can engage in with an employee is the mixed contract, which is partly formal and partly informal ('*mitad blanco y mitad negro*' in Spanish, which literally means 'half white and half black'). While most Korean shop owners adhere to fully formal contracts, particularly in line with Argentine labor laws, only smaller-scale establishments opt for partly formal and partly informal arrangements to control employment expenses.

While I was conducting field research in the Avellaneda Avenue wholesale area, I spent quite a long time in shopping malls and had the

chance to talk to a couple of Argentine or Jewish wholesalers who ran small kiosks. They shared very interesting views about employment issues with me. Surprisingly, they usually hire local employees informally, and the degree of informality was much higher in terms of employment compared to the Korean wholesalers (Kim 2021). Native-born Argentine entrepreneurs also freely admit that it is not easy to manage employees, but the issues they presented in their interviews were usually much less fraught than those of Korean owners. Furthermore, Argentine wholesalers frequently chastise Korean employers, whom they believe mistreat employees, as revealed in the interview below:

> It's not about hiring legally or not. It is about how they treat the people. They are not subordinates but employees. I know it's difficult to deal with the employees, but basically you should respect them at the very least. I hire people in black [informally], but I treat them very well. I heard that they [Koreans] do not treat employees in a good way.[2]

As indicated by the account above, numerous local Argentine wholesalers also operate without formal employee hires, and informal employment practices are widespread in the Avellaneda Avenue wholesale area. In contrast, Korean small- and medium-sized businesses exhibit a higher level of formality in their employment practices compared to those run by Argentines or Jewish Argentines. This discrepancy arises because local employers can foster better relationships with their employees, manage them without formal contracts, and mitigate the risk of legal conflicts within the existing institutional regulations and employment laws.

Through my field research, I've observed how Korean entrepreneurs adopt strategic approaches to foster positive working relationships and mitigate risks associated with conflicts with their local Argentine employees. Insights from a second-generation Korean Argentine entrepreneur shed light on their effective employee management practices:

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2. Argentine participant whose information has been withheld at request of interviewee, interview by author, April 25, 2014 (Kim 2021, 117).

> Managing employees isn't easy, but we rarely encounter issues with them. Some employees have been with us for twenty years, long before I joined to assist my mom. Initially, my mom began hiring people recommended by other reliable employees, and we've continued this practice. As a second-generation raised in Argentina, I understand their mentality much better. My approach is simple: I first attempt to discuss and resolve any unhappiness or issues that arise. If the conditions we offer aren't satisfactory to them, they are free to leave; there's no middle ground, and this approach has worked well for us. I've heard that some first-generation Korean entrepreneurs tend to adopt a more authoritarian style, shouting or scolding employees, but in Argentina, we believe in treating employees well.[3]

In their employee management strategies, some Korean entrepreneurs suggest prioritizing formal contracts, valuing employee loyalty, and employing alternative hiring methods, such as referrals from trusted employees or family members, to maintain a stable and reliable workforce. They also emphasize compliance with labor laws to mitigate potential risks associated with employee management and stress the importance of establishing good relationships.

Despite efforts to establish better relationships with local employees, Korean entrepreneurs encounter challenges and conflicts within their workforce. To address this issue, the Chamber of Korean Entrepreneurs in Argentina has instituted a *blacklist* to aid employers in recognizing and steering clear of problematic employees who have been reported by Korean entrepreneurs. These reports are then published on the Chamber's webpage for reference and awareness. This initiative has been well-received by Korean wholesalers who find it helpful in managing employment issues effectively.

As highlighted in this section, the contrasting working styles and cultural differences between Koreans and Argentines have posed challenges to Korean employers in fostering positive working relationships with local employees. These differences have rendered Korean employers more vulnerable to legal disputes and potential lawsuits from their local

3. Korean-Argentine male, 36 years old, interview by author, May 22, 2023.

employees. To mitigate these risks, Korean employers have been meticulous in addressing employment issues and implementing strategies to cultivate favorable relationships and prevent litigation.

Moving forward, it is crucial to delve into the dynamics of employment relationships between Korean employers and co-ethnic Korean employees. This exploration will offer valuable insights into the intricacies of the employment landscape within Korean-owned businesses, providing a comprehensive understanding of how these relationships contribute to the overall functioning of such enterprises.

## Co-Ethnic Employees and Informal Arrangements: Advantages for Employers but Disadvantages for Employees

Typically, young Korean Argentines (usually 1.5- or second-generation) are informally hired as shop managers. They primarily interact with customers at the counter and facilitate task coordination between Korean owners and local shop assistants (Kim 2021). Many young 1.5- or second-generation Korean interviewees view employment with Korean entrepreneurs as a preferable opportunity. This preference stems from the higher black (informal) salaries offered compared to the white (formal) salaries provided by Argentine employers. They prioritize better wages over the benefits associated with a formal contract, as evidenced in the following interview excerpts:

> Because of the language compatibility and the sense of reliance and trust, Korean owners can place them [Korean employees] in charge. It's convenient for the employer. […] I think that the salary [of the Korean employee] is almost twice [that of] a local employee.[4]
>
> When I was studying information technology at the university [in the 1990s], the salary for workers in the IT area was 500 pesos, while the

4. Korean-Argentine female, 31 years old (migrated in 1993), interview by author, May 20, 2014 (Kim 2021, 123).

> salary at the clothing factory was 1,000 pesos.[5] It's the reason why I started working here. It was a factory directly owned by a large-scale wholesale shop. All the local employees worked on formal contracts except me.[6]

As demonstrated in the above accounts, working for a co-ethnic employer appears to be advantageous, leading many younger-generation Korean Argentines to prefer this option. However, interviews with young Korean employees also revealed several disadvantages of informal employment with co-ethnic Korean employers. One interviewee highlighted the inability to request pay raises despite worsening inflation, in contrast to local employees who could do so. Additionally, others expressed a desire for formal contracts to access healthcare and pension benefits, and to avoid high costs associated with illness. They noted that without employer contributions to social security, they are compelled to pay for private health insurance. Despite recognizing the potential benefits of formal employment, some feel it would be futile to discuss this with their employers, perceiving a collective reluctance among Korean entrepreneurs to pay taxes due to skepticism about receiving government benefits. These insights shed light on the complexities faced by young Korean employees in informal work arrangements.

As mentioned previously, labor rules and regulations in Argentina are very strict. Employees who work without a formal contract can easily sue and claim compensation, and the government usually supports and sides with workers. However, given the close-knit nature and small size of the Korean community, legal actions can have repercussions on future job prospects within the community. Thus, for co-ethnic employees, it is tough to defend their rights when they feel exploited, as explained by this interviewee:

> Korean employees seem to get better salaries, but what they get in the end

5. During the 1990s, the exchange rate between the peso and the US dollar was generally 1:1.
6. Korean-Argentine male, 34 years old (migrated in 1986), interview by author, March 2, 2014 (Kim 2021, 123).

> will be similar to what local employees get, because Koreans [employees] work under informal contracts, so employers don't pay their social security contributions. Some local employees sue [Korean] employers, so the money saved by the employer goes to settle those disputes. Recently, I heard of a case of a young Korean employee who sued their Korean employer. But in this case, the employee suffered more than the employer because [the] Avellaneda Avenue [wholesale area] is so small that he won't be able to get any job here ever again.[7]

As evident from the interviews with Korean employees, there are both advantages and disadvantages associated with working for co-ethnic employers. Light asserts in his study that within the unregulated informal economy, it is essential for both employers and employees to be integrated into a social network, as it facilitates essential linkages and cooperation, and establishes norms for work standards and practices. Consequently, trust plays a significant role in informal employment arrangements due to the personal nature of the work involved (Light 2006, 711). However, the consequences of this are twofold: some employers may exploit this reliable arrangement while others may act in non-exploitative ways or ways that exceed the expectations of the employer-employee relationship (McGrath 2010, 156).

While most Korean employees communicated both positive and negative aspects of working for co-ethnic employers, Korean employers tend to highlight the positive aspects of hiring co-ethnic workers. In the interviews, many Korean owners, especially the first-generation immigrants, highlighted the significant difference between local and Korean employees, noting that Korean employees consistently fulfill their duties regardless of supervision, whereas local employees exhibit varying behaviors in the absence of supervision. Despite acknowledging the disparity in salary, they believe it is justified given the level of trust and productivity exhibited by Korean employees. Moreover, they shared the challenges of finding

7. Korean-Argentine male, 34 years old (migrated in 1986), interview by author, March 2, 2014 (Kim 2021, 124).

trustworthy employees and expressed a preference for hiring Korean managers due to their reliability and familiarity with the business. Despite paying the Korean managers a higher salary informally, they value their competence and understanding of the business operations.

Korean employees are often perceived as "hardworking" and "responsible" in comparison to Argentine employees (Kim 2021). Additionally, Korean employers tend to place more trust in co-ethnic managers than in Argentine ones. Strong relationships built on trust are particularly crucial in the wholesale garment sector around Avellaneda Avenue, where informality is prevalent, tax evasion is common, and transactions are predominantly conducted in cash. This trust-based relationship also influences the level of informality in employment practices. Interestingly enough, while Argentine employees show a high rate of formality in most Korean firms, Korean managers work informally at the same firm. This clearly shows the dynamic interaction between different domains of embeddedness depending on the social actors involved. Rules and regulations that frame and control employment rights and benefits in Argentina are the same regardless of employers' and employees' ethnicity. However, at a same Korean wholesale shop, depending on a worker's ethnicity, the degree of formality takes shape differently. As the theory of mixed embeddedness suggests, a reliable relationship can easily be generated by social networks that are based on either a shared migration experience or a shared non-indigenous identity (Kloosterman et al. 1999, 262). The benefit from being embedded in social networks is mainly rooted in co-ethnicity; and these networks generate clients, employees, capital, and trust, enabling them to engage in informal economic practices (Kloosterman et al. 1999, 263).

Tilly (2007, 6) elaborates on the crucial role of strict boundaries within trust networks formed by ethnic groups. These boundaries, separating insiders from outsiders, are essential for the effective functioning of trust networks. The insulation of these networks from external influences facilitates continuous monitoring, mutual assistance, reciprocity, trust, and barriers to exit (Tilly 2007, 12). For Korean wholesalers, employing individuals labeled as co-ethnic implies reliable relationships, loyalty, and strong trust. Consequently, hiring them informally is not perceived as a risky practice. Trusted individuals within the network are often assigned critical

tasks such as bookkeeping, managing customer relations, and handling cash (Tilly 2007, 12).

Allocating these tasks to core network members allows entrepreneurs a certain degree of confidence in managing the business, particularly in an informal manner. However, even certified co-ethnic employees are no guarantee of 100 percent trustworthy relations. Unreliable relations can occur between Korean employers and co-ethnic employees; similarly, trustworthy relationships can be maintained between Korean employers and Argentine employees. Below are a few revealing cases described by Korean owners:

> It's not just a matter of trusting any Koreans. Among our 23 employees, 4 are Koreans: 2 shop managers, 1 factory manager, and 1 designer. We hired Korean employees based on recommendations from Korean friends. However, we've heard of a few cases where Korean shop managers have been involved in misconduct. These days, it's challenging to trust solely based on ethnicity. To ensure reliability, we now only hire Korean employees who are directly connected with trusted references. We've also observed that many second-generation Koreans are becoming Argentinized and may not be as inclined to work hard, especially compared to first-generation Korean immigrants. Thus, the trend towards trusting Korean employees is gradually changing. Eventually, we are witnessing cases where Korean owners opt to hire Argentine shop managers instead of Korean shop managers.[8]
>
> For me, I am much more comfortable with local Argentine employees. It may be because I grew up here. I understand the mind of local people much better, so I communicate with them better. I give them my trust and make them feel comfortable instead of pointing out every single error. I don't care if they work a little more or a little less. It's their working style, and you can't change it.[9]

8. Korean-Argentine male, 38 years old, interview by author, June 14, 2023.
9. Korean-Argentine female, 50 years old (migrated in 1970), interview by author, April 23, 2014 (Kim 2021, 122).

As demonstrated in these interview excerpts, while Korean wholesalers often prioritize hiring co-ethnic employees due to trust and reliable relations, there are cases where they prefer local employees over Koreans. This preference for locals stems from a better understanding of local culture and communication, allowing for the establishment of strong relationships. Additionally, there are gradual tendencies where Korean owners do not trust Korean employees based solely on their ethnicity. Furthermore, due to stricter government inspections of employment practices, Korean employers are now required to formally hire even Korean shop managers. This shift reflects how strict law enforcement influences entrepreneurial management and operations at a formal level (Kloosterman et al. 1999), rather than employment choices based purely on ethnicity. These examples underscore the complexity of employment patterns, challenging the notion of generalizing tendencies based solely on ethnic lines.

## Conclusion

As observed in this study, Argentine entrepreneurs in the garment industry exhibit a high level of informality in their employment practices, showing that such informality is not exclusive to Korean immigrants. In the management of Korean employees in wholesale shops, the dynamics of informality differ based on the ethnicity of the employees. Korean wholesalers typically opt for informal arrangements when hiring co-ethnic employees, while they prefer formal, contractual agreements for local Argentine employees. This preference is influenced by stringent government regulations regarding formal employment, as well as differences in working styles and cultures between Koreans and Argentines. These employers often rely on trust-based labor relations with co-ethnic workers, leading to informal employment conditions without formal contracts. However, it is evident from the data that trust can also be established in relationships between different ethnic groups, challenging the notion that trust is exclusive to co-ethnic interactions. Conversely, unreliable relationships can emerge even among co-ethnic employees and employers. In short, working

relationships and boundaries between informal and formal management depend on the networks of bounded solidarity and tacit trust that have been generated by the involved actors (Light 2006, 710). For instance, ethnic networks are regarded as available resources that can facilitate effective co-ethnic employment management and thereby be used to avoid litigation, but worker *ethnicity* does not function as an absolute and fixed rule or filter.

Furthermore, increased government scrutiny of employment practices now requires Korean employers to formally hire even Korean shop managers. This shift highlights how stringent law enforcement affects entrepreneurial management and operations in a formal manner (Kloosterman et al. 1999), rather than being influenced purely by ethnic considerations. These changes underscore the complexity of employment patterns and challenge the prevalent criticism in Argentina of Korean immigrants in the garment industry for their informal practices (Lieutier 2010; Montero 2012; Dewey 2020). The study reveals that such practices are not unique to Korean immigrants but are widespread across the Argentine garment sector, supporting Williams's assertion (2004, 14) that "there is no strong correlation between ethnicity and participation in the informal economy." This illustrates that employment practices within Korean wholesale businesses are shaped by a complex interplay of economic, structural, and political factors, with government control, corruption, and labor laws playing significant roles. Therefore, the impact of ethnicity should be understood within the broader context of these influencing factors.

The findings of this research indicate that the distinction between formal and informal management practices is not always straightforward, but rather nuanced and blurry. Ethnic business practices and performances should be analyzed within a spectrum of individual, ethnic, and contextual factors, rather than solely through the lens of a binary formal versus informal categorization. Complex issues, relations, and activities intricately interact in these grey zones; they constantly vary—like everybody and everything else—within the social, economic, and political contexts of the host country.

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