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A mixed methods investigation of international students' perceptions of their experiences of marginalization in Korean higher education

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ABSTRACT

As Korea expands its global outreach and more international students attend its universities, how to acculturate and accommodate these students needs to be investigated. The purpose of this study is to examine the acculturation process of international students at one private tertiary institution in Korea to determine their perceptions of their institution and host country with the aim of improving Korea's multicultural policies. The methodology utilized for this study was an explanatory mixed methods approach to examine international students' experiences. A quantitative measurement using multiple regression analysis to identify the variables affecting student acculturation and a qualitative investigation to contextualize the regression results were implemented. The multiple regression findings demonstrate that the year of study correlates with cultural and linguistic disinterest. In addition, senior students reported lower support rates. The qualitative results indicate that acculturative stress factors stemmed mainly from perceived institutional marginalization and implicit discrimination from the host country institution. The significance of the findings based on the synthesis of the qualitative and quantitative results suggest that culturally and linguistically competent students were unsatisfied with the services of their host institution. A practical implication of this study is that more encompassing and supportive communities for international students are needed to increase student satisfaction and feelings of inclusion.

Contribution/Originality: The unique contribution of this study is that it brings to light the prevalence of the inherent marginalization and discrimination experienced by international students at Korean universities. It provides the context and justification for the necessity of salient improvements with regard to multicultural policy to accommodate international students in Korea.

1. INTRODUCTION

The total number of international students in South Korean universities (hereafter Korea) is 166,869 (Korean Educational Statistics Service, 2022). This number will only increase because of Korea's decreasing domestic population (Byun et al., 2011; Jon, Cho, & Byun, 2020). The pressure to widen the scope of international outreach in higher education has created a polarizing effect, as multiculturalism faces limited public support in Korean society (Denney & Green, 2021). Substantial evidence has revealed discrimination and institutional racism in Korean higher education and society (Kim, 2020; Lee, Jon, & Byun, 2017; Santos, 2020). However, Korea's demographic challenge and the domestic competition to attract international students have spurred research to improve student experiences

(Cordier & Alemu, 2017; Jin, Ahn, & Lee, 2022), broaden the current acculturative policies in Korean higher education (Choi, 2021) and increase the marketability and value of Korean universities (Bae & Song, 2017; Cordier & Alemu, 2017; Kazakova, Karimova, & Kim, 2021). The growing literature on this subject shows the palpable tension in discussing the acculturative experiences of international students in Korea (Jung, 2022; Lee, Park, & Cho, 2020; Lee et al., 2017; Park & Noh, 2018).

This study investigates the acculturative process of international students at one private tertiary institution in Korea to determine how their perceptions of their institution and host country manifest subjective and authentic experiences in the ultimate hope of aiding Korea's multicultural policies. Recruiting international students would help address the decreasing domestic student population (Byun et al., 2011; Kim, 2017). Thus, international students' acculturation is critical as they are the new stakeholders of Korean higher education (Cordier & Alemu, 2017; Kazakova et al., 2021). Berry (2006b) outlined the preferred outcome of host countries as either assimilation or integration, with the latter being the preferred accommodating outcome of most robust multicultural societies. Korea's growing reputation as a preferred destination for global student mobility (Jin et al., 2022; Juraev, Kiatkawsin, Mukhammadieva, & Kim, 2022) conflicts with public sentiment, preferring homogeneity (Denney & Green, 2021; Kim, 2020). This paper outlines the possible reconciliation of the competing interests in Korean higher education. The researcher believes that Korean higher education policymakers should heed international students' negative experiences; the pervasive systemic issues in Korean institutions hurt Korea's reputation and impede international student recruitment goals (Jon & Ayhan, 2021). The significance of this study is in answering a fundamental question of acculturation in Korean universities through the following research question: How do international students' perceptions of their host country and tertiary institution influence the outcome of their acculturation process at one institution in Korea?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Challenges Integrating Multiculturalism in Korean Society and Higher Education

Jung (2022) conducted a study on Chinese immigrants in South Korea and found a positive correlation between openness to cultural experiences and integration, whereby an individual's willingness to assimilate correlates with the acculturative relief that the individual experiences in the host country. Lack of integration in the host culture increases the likelihood of dissatisfaction and cultural stress (Berry, 2006b). Previous research has formulated a reliable framework for student integration. Implementing a program which serves that purpose requires an encompassing multicultural policy from the host university and a broad multicultural platform in the host country (Korobova & Starobin, 2015; Merola, Coelen, & Hofman, 2019; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). This might not be the case in South Korea. Unlike the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, which has had an influx of immigrant populations for over a century, Korea has a limited tradition of multiculturalism (Denney & Green, 2021). The surge of global student mobility in Korean universities and the increased number of immigrants in Korean social spaces have been met with public resistance and skepticism (Denney & Green, 2021; Kim, 2020; Lee et al., 2017). Even though Korea has one of the lowest birthrates in the world (Walton, 2020) the bleak future of educational markets with a shrinking clientele cannot change the public sentiment resistant to an open immigration policy (Lee et al., 2017). For many Koreans, the traditional narrative of racial homogeneity trumps any multicultural policy (Denney & Green, 2021; Kim, 2020). Koreans have difficulty welcoming sojourners and migrants who appear to have distinct cultural values compared to migrants whose cultures approximate Korean values (Denney & Green, 2021). To complicate matters, Koreans prefer Western and European ethnic and racial identities over African or Southeast Asian racial groups (Kim, 2017; Lee et al., 2017). This Western bias underlies the unfortunate discrimination against people who fall outside the category of fair and light-skinned, specifically Southeast Asians (Denney & Green, 2021; Lee et al., 2017).

The evidence appears to support an unfavorable representation of Korea as a destination for international students, given the public suspicion and racial discrimination faced by someone who is culturally distant from Korean values or does not conform to the stereotypical features of Western people (Denney & Green, 2021; Lee et al., 2020). One study suggested that some Korean students felt uncomfortable communicating with international students and were unwilling to collaborate with them on group projects (Lee et al., 2020). To make things worse, a few studies have reported that Korean professors felt burdened to communicate in English, even in universities offering English courses, and preferred to use Korean in an international classroom (Kim, 2017; Rabbidge & Banerjee, 2022). The qualitative evidence has demonstrated how encounters with racial prejudice lowered their overall satisfaction (Jon & Ayhan, 2021), morale, and self-efficacy (Slick & Lee, 2014). Overall, it appears that stress related to adaptation and acculturation experienced by international students correlates with the length of stay (Park & Noh, 2018) the lack of equal recognition in Korea, and negative encounters with local citizens (Kang & Metcalfe, 2019; Suh, Flores, & Wang, 2019).

2.2. Theoretical Framework

To better explain the nuances of student experiences, this study adopts the tenets of acculturation as a theoretical lens to delineate student adaptation journeys, specifically examining cultural interests and integrations as correlating factors to acculturation. Acculturation is defined as the attitude and belief toward the mainstream culture of the host country and a person's willingness to endorse the embodied values of that culture (Berry, 2006a; Jin et al., 2022). Acculturative stress, defined as the negative feelings experienced while adjusting and adapting to a host country's culture, has been extensively discussed regarding resistance, feelings, and attitudes of maladaptation (Jung, 2022; Lee et al., 2020; Sam, 2006). The role of the host country also matters as some societies are more open to integration, while some demand assimilation (Berry, 2006a). Given that acculturation is a dialogical interaction between migrants and host societies (Berry, 2006b; Sam, 2006) the stress of assimilation and integration manifests but is not limited to academic pressure, cultural conflicts, encounters and experiences of discrimination, and linguistic barriers (Jung, 2022). Recently collected data has demonstrated how acculturative stress significantly impacts mental health and general well-being (Collins, Dailey-Strand, & Callaghan, 2021; Kim & Kim, 2021).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. A Mixed Methods Approach

This paper utilized a mixed methods approach to investigate the perceptions of one group of international students. Multiple linear regression tests were used to examine the relationship between acculturation and the predictive variables related to student demographics. The Likert questionnaire used by Lee et al. (2017) was adopted, which focuses on determining the extent of discrimination experienced by international students in Korea. For this study, the questionnaire items were modified to examine the factors of acculturative experiences and their relative effects on student perceptions. Like the study by Lee et al. (2017) an explanatory approach was utilized to establish a robust connection between the quantifiable variables (demographics) and the qualitative dimension of student experiences. This approach was informed by the mixed methods guidelines articulated by Creswell (2014) and Leavy (2017) to synthesize regression results and qualitative findings to account for the feedback loop of student experiences and cultural encounters. The quantitative data indicated a general trend, and the analysis of the interviews, survey comments, and focus group discussion provide contextual support for the correlations indicated in the regression models.

3.2. Data Analysis: Multiple Regression & Case Study

The initial data analysis stage required determining the variables affecting the variation of acculturative experiences. Multiple regression analysis using SPSS 27 determined the predictive power of the independent variables

to explain the variances in the dependent variables. Once the regression results demonstrated a robust connection between the predictors and dependent variables, a case study approach was used to analyze the participants' intersubjective experiences to further understand the factors affecting acculturation. A case study approach is appropriate because it allows the researcher to obtain an in-depth examination of the richly detailed, lived-in experiences of the participants (Merriam, 1998) who, in this case, were the international students at a private tertiary institution in Korea. The semi-structured interviews and focus group transcripts were analyzed and coded inductively and recursively based on the constant comparison method of Strauss and Corbin (1998) in grounded theory. Accordingly, open, axial, and selective coding were conducted. When no new themes or subthemes were found—over thirty categories were identified—data saturation had been reached. Although several major themes emerged during data analysis, this paper focused on two in-depth connected themes complemented by the regression results.

3.3. Data Collection

The study was conducted in a growing multicultural environment in a large city. The sample population was chosen because of the high number of international students in the university, which was over 2000 (approx.) by March 2022. Institutional ethics approval was obtained from the Woosong University Institutional Review Board. Subsequently, data was collected from July 2022 to July 2023. Both qualitative and quantitative data collection followed standard ethical procedures. Written informed consent from the participants was acquired before the data collection. The research study's goals, motivations, and parameters were explained to each participant before each interview. For the questionnaire, international students from the participating university were notified and sent an email from the university offices; an administrator sent an email requesting students' voluntary participation in completing the survey. The students were asked to respond to the questionnaire items using Google Forms, which collected information about their gender, country of origin, year of study, and length of stay in Korea. Next, student volunteers responded to interview requests made by the international center on behalf of the researcher. After four months of data collection, 126 responses were accepted based on self-reported demographics and survey completion. When the questionnaire was closed, qualitative data collection began. Fourteen students volunteered to be interviewed for ninety-minute sessions. The semi-structured interviews reviewed the questionnaire items with students so they could narrate their experiences, giving insight into the conditions contributing to their positive or negative experiences. The qualitative data included fourteen student interviews and a focus group discussion; all of the participants were part of the quantitative sample population. After the semi-structured interviews were completed, the researcher listened to the interviews and transcribed the audio content. During transcription, pseudonyms were used, and some parts of the interview content were edited for clarity and privacy. After preliminary qualitative and quantitative data analysis, a focus group discussion was held to confirm the tentative themes.

3.4. Sample Population Profile

When the questionnaire data collection was closed, the total number of participants was 126 international students. Approximately 40% of the participants were first-year students, and 37% had been in Korea for fewer than three months. In contrast, 37% had lived and studied in Korea for more than a year, and juniors and seniors made up 46%. All individuals voluntarily moved to Korea to complete a degree or study for a year. These students self-reported different motivations for studying in Korea, but they exemplify 'pull' motivation because of the high and positive expectations of the host country (Sam, 2006). A critical characteristic is that almost half of the participants were students who had recently arrived in Korea. Another critical aspect is that 24% of all participants were from Uzbekistan. These two factors were key features that helped the researcher approach the quantitative tests and qualitative data collection carefully and had to be considered as potential study limitations, which are discussed at the end of this paper.

Table 1 presents the demographic profiles of the sample population.

Table 1. Demographic profiles of the sample population.

Country of origin	N	%	Year of study	N	%
Armenia	1	0.79	First year	50	39.84
Bangladesh	9	7.14	Second year	13	27.34
Belarus	4	3.17	Third year	26	18.75
Brazil	2	1.59	Fourth year	32	10.16
Cambodia	2	1.59	Graduate student	5	3.91
Canada	2	1.59			
China	5	3.97	Gender	N	%
Ethiopia	1	0.79	Female	54	42.85
France	7	5.56	Male	70	55.55
Germany	2	1.59	I prefer not to say	2	0.015
India	9	7.14			
Indonesia	7	5.56			
Israel	1	0.79	Time in Korea	N	%
Jamaica	1	0.79	< Three months	46	36.51
Kazakhstan	7	5.56	< A year	17	13.49
Kyrgyzstan	4	3.17	> A year	17	13.49
Mexico	1	0.79	> Two years	16	12.70
Myanmar	8	6.35	> Three years	30	23.81
Nepal	5	3.97			
Nigeria	1	0.79			
Norway	1	0.79			
Pakistan	3	2.38			
Russia	5	3.97			
Uzbekistan	30	23.81			
Vietnam	8	6.35			
Total				126	100%

4. RESULTS

The questionnaire results were first analyzed for reliability. The length of time in Korea, year of study, and gender were chosen as the appropriate independent variables. Standard multiple regression tests were then used to determine if the independent variables (gender, year of study, time in Korea, country of origin) were significant predictors of the dependent variables (the relevant questionnaire items). After looking at demographics, the reliability of the questionnaire results was calculated. The Cronbach's alpha score was 0.914, indicating a high degree of reliability. Because this paper focused on students' interest in Korean culture and language and their level of feelings of support, the results and discussion will demonstrate both quantitative and qualitative significance to three relevant questionnaire items.

Table 2 presents the questionnaire responses and items of significance.

Table 2. Questionnaire responses & items of significance.

Item	Mean	Standard deviation
1. I feel comfortable when I am interacting with my Korean classmates.	3.44	0.988
2. I feel comfortable when I am interacting with my Korean professors.	3.72	0.998
3. I feel comfortable when I am interacting with my international professors.	4.52	0.784
4. I feel comfortable interacting with the Korean administrative staff.	3.2	1.197
5. I feel comfortable interacting with the international administrative staff.	4.21	0.938
6. I feel comfortable interacting with Korean students on campus.	3.33	1.109
7. I feel comfortable interacting with international students on campus.	4.37	0.774
8. I am treated fairly compared to Korean students.	3.33	1.282
9. I am treated fairly compared to other international students.	4.13	0.936
10. I find it easy to live in South Korea.	3.31	1.021

Item	Mean	Standard deviation
11. I find it easy to study in South Korea.	3.55	0.988
12. I am in a supportive environment in South Korea.	3.52	1.108
13. Korean people accept my ethnicity and cultural background.	3.47	1.1
14. I am interested in learning about Korean culture.	3.93	1.241
15. I want to be a fluent Korean speaker.	4.18	1.136
16. I have had a positive experience in South Korea so far.	3.8	1.036
17. After I graduate, I hope to continue living in South Korea.	3.18	1.266

Items of significance	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
12. I am in a supportive environment in South Korea.	6	13	38	38	31
14. I am interested in learning about Korean culture.	7	8	23	31	57
15. I want to be a fluent Korean speaker.	6	7	11	31	71

4.1. Standard Multiple Regression Results

A multiple regression test of the variables in questionnaire item 12 was statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.165$, F [4, 123] = 6.085, p < 0.050), and the variables of gender, years in Korea, year of study, and country of origin accounted for 17% of the variance. In Table 3, the year of study variable has a beta coefficient of -0.299, which means that for every one-unit increase in the year of study, the predicted value of the dependent value decreases by 0.299; therefore, year of study has a negative correlation with the feeling of support. The zero correlation in the model is above 0.300, which means that the independent variable is above the preferred cut-off point (Pallant, 2016). Also, the collinearity values for tolerance and the variance inflation factor (VIF) demonstrate that multicollinearity is not a problem as the values did not exceed 10 (Pallant, 2016).

Table 3 presents the model summary for questionnaire item 12.

Table 3. Model summary for questionnaire item 12.

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.	Correlations			Collinearity statistics	
	B	Std. error	Beta			Zero-order	Partial	Part	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	3.767	0.318		11.855	0.000					
Gender	0.089	0.174	0.044	0.508	0.612	0.094	0.046	0.042	0.925	1.081
Year of study	-0.244	0.101	-0.299	-2.417	0.017	-0.329	-0.213	-0.199	0.444	2.250
Country of origin	0.038	0.016	0.217	2.414	0.017	0.249	0.213	0.199	0.838	1.193
Years in Korea	-0.020	0.087	-0.029	-0.229	0.819	-0.299	-0.021	-0.019	0.417	2.397
12. I am in a supportive environment in South Korea.										

A multiple regression test of the variables in questionnaire item 14 was also statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.206$, F [4, 123] = 7.985, p < 0.050). Gender, years in Korea, year of study, and country of origin accounted for 21% of the variance. In Table 4, the year of study has a beta coefficient of -0.286, which means that for every one-unit increase in the year of study, the predicted value of the dependent value decreases by 0.286. The zero correlation is -0.478, indicating a correlation between the year of study and interest in Korean culture and a negative correlation between both variables. While country of origin and gender have p-values under 0.050, a correlation cannot be established given the low value of 0.007 for country of origin and 0.020 for gender. The collinearity values demonstrate that multicollinearity is not an issue.

Table 4. Model summary for questionnaire item 14.

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.	Correlations			Collinearity statistics	
	B	Std. error	Beta			Zero-order	Partial	Part	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	3.774	0.346		10.916	0.000	3.090				
Gender	0.395	0.189	0.174	2.083	0.039	0.020	0.770	0.222	0.185	0.167
Year of study	-0.260	0.110	-0.286	-2.370	0.019	-0.478	-0.043	-0.329	-0.209	-0.190
Country of origin	0.041	0.017	0.209	2.379	0.019	0.007	0.075	0.279	0.210	0.191
Years in Korea	-0.038	0.095	-0.050	-0.406	0.686	-0.226	0.149	-0.307	-0.037	-0.033
14. I am interested in learning about Korean culture.										

Table 5. Model summary for questionnaire 15.

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.	Correlations			Collinearity statistics	
	B	Std. error	Beta			Zero-order	Partial	Part	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	4.266	0.330		12.917	0.000	3.612				
Gender	0.371	0.181	0.176	2.051	0.042	0.013	0.730	0.189	0.182	0.169
Year of study	-0.254	0.105	-0.299	-2.419	0.017	-0.461	-0.046	-0.343	-0.213	-0.199
Country of origin	0.014	0.016	0.075	0.829	0.409	-0.019	0.046	0.148	0.075	0.068
Years in Korea	-0.042	0.091	-0.059	-0.466	0.642	-0.221	0.137	-0.294	-0.042	-0.038
15. I want to be a fluent Korean speaker.										

The multiple regression test of the variables in questionnaire item 15 was statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.164$, F $[4, 123] = 6.041$, $p < 0.050$), and the variables of gender, years in Korea, year of study, and country of origin accounted for 16% of the variance. In Table 5, the year of study has a beta coefficient of -0.299, which means that for every one-unit increase in the year of study, the predicted value of the dependent value decreases by 0.299. The zero correlation is -0.461, which shows a negative correlation between the year of study and the desire for Korean fluency. As gender has a p-value under 0.050, a correlation cannot be established given the low importance of 0.013 for gender. The values also demonstrate that multicollinearity is not a concern.

The findings of the multiple regression models indicate that the year of study as a predictor has a significant relationship with feelings of support and interest in Korean culture and language. The test results revealed a negative correlation between the independent and dependent variables, meaning that students close to completing their studies in Korea are more likely to be disinterested in their host country's culture and language. Although the model is limited, the study results show that senior students will feel less supported in Korea than newer students. The results tentatively demonstrate that the longer the length of stay, the lower the feeling of support and the less interested international students become in the host culture.

4.2. Qualitative Findings

The quantitative results reveal that the year of study negatively correlates with Korean language and culture interests. Interviews and a focus group discussion were conducted to uncover the reasons for the negative correlation. Fourteen students were interviewed, and ten participated in the focus group discussion.

Table 6 presents the demographic information of the interview and focus group participants.

Table 6. Demographic information of the interview and focus group participants.

Participant name	Gender	Country of origin	Year of study	Time in Korea
1. Ahmed	Male	Uzbekistan	4th year	Four years
2. Kera	Female	India	1st year	< Three months
3. Mehmet	Male	Uzbekistan	1st year	< Three months
4. Sara	Female	Indonesia	2nd year	< Three months
5. Maya	Female	India	2nd year	> Two years
6. Dhruv	Male	India	2nd year	One year
7. Laksmi	Female	Nepal	4th year	Four years
8. Abdul	Male	Bangladesh	2nd year	< Three months
9. Iris	Female	Kyrgyzstan	2nd year	One year
10. Chang	Male	China	Graduate	> Two years
11. Zhao	Female	China	Graduate	> Two years
12. Serena	Female	France	1st year	< Three months
13. Sam	Male	Nepal	4th year	> Five years
14. Ken	Male	Uzbekistan	4th year	Four years

The interviews and the focus group discussion uncovered two critical themes that complement the negative correlation found in the quantitative analysis. From the qualitative data analysis, it became apparent how negative experiences of alterity, such as discrimination and student discontent with university services, potentially explain why senior students felt dissatisfied and were disinterested in their host country's culture and language.

Theme 1: Discrimination and Foreigners as Tourist Attractions

There are two manifestations of discrimination: implicit exclusion and explicit exclusion of another person's otherness. The interviews made it clear that even new international students encountered implicit racial discrimination within the first few months of their stay. Student #8, Abdul, had only been in Korea for two months. As a first-year student, he described the difficulty of not knowing enough Korean while shopping and feeling unwelcome by Korean people.

"I am not white; I am brown and South Asian. I was sitting on the bus, and the seat next to me was empty. Some Koreans stood the whole time. I did not ask them, but I found it weird that they left the center open. Maybe they need help approaching a foreigner."

Abdul's experience was a common thread. A French first-year student named Serena explained the subtle exclusion she felt while living in Korea. Serena, whose mother is ethnically French but father is Malagasy, described how Koreans were often surprised by her nationality.

C: Did Korean people generally accept your ethnicity and cultural background?

S: No. I am French, so that helps a lot. People are amazed, but my skin color and hair are not helping me that much. Koreans are in awe only when I tell them that I am French. However, if I stay silent, they only see me as a foreigner, and I feel different.

This type of treatment was readily confirmed by a senior who had never had a direct experience of racism in Korea but felt like an outsider. Student #14, Ken, an Uzbek senior student who had described his time in a Korean university as a positive one, told of how he felt Koreans preferred not to sit next to him. He stated, "Sometimes, I had a feeling that when I sat on the bus, no one would sit next to me because I was not Korean."

While first-years Abdul, Ken, and Serena had subtle encounters of being treated as an alien or a stranger, one participant shared an explicit encounter with racism at work. Dhruv, a second-year student, experienced a traumatic incident at his part-time job. It became clear to Dhruv that his job was not a place of equal treatment after he made a mistake, and his boss proceeded to humiliate him.

"My boss started yelling at me the first time I visited my workplace. He verbally abused me, and I did not understand then. After knowing what he said, I felt terrible. My work has slightly improved, but sometimes he still yells at me."

The student was upset as he imparted the details of the incident. He was conflicted because he did not want to cause any trouble for his employer. However, his boss also humiliated him while everyone at his job was present. Dhruv permitted the researcher to share this story because he believed the experience was not an isolated incident but a common occurrence that needs to be known.

In contrast to Dhruv, Sam had a different story, one of redemption and reconciliation. Sam was a senior, and during his four years in Korea he overcame the challenges of adapting to his new environment, learning the sociolinguistic cues of Korean people and managing the stress of acculturating to Korean culture by becoming close friends with local Koreans. Like the other students, Sam felt he was treated differently because he was not Korean. However, Sam's case was exceptional, especially in how he delineated the spectrum of marginalized experiences of international students, as even the most positive experiences of acceptance and acculturation have their limits.

C: What are your experiences with Korean students? Have they generally been positive, negative, or neutral?

S: It depends on how we interact with them. As I said, they will push us away when we say bad things about Korea. However, Korea is very new to foreign people, right? As I said, I am a tourist attraction for them, and it is different when a foreigner comes here. We are a well-made statue, and everyone wants to go and take pictures when seeing us, so it is easy.

Sam's positive acculturation is articulated in the language of visibility and novelty, as if his physical appearance as a foreigner must be "well-made." Integrating in Korea requires accepting that his alterity—his identity as containing fundamental differences—must be non-threatening to Korean people. Sam's integration depended entirely on his self-determination to embrace the Korean interpretation of his alterity to feel the positive support that some of his peers did not have.

Each of the experiences detailed here portrays the levels of alterity: implicit exclusion and explicit exclusion. The last account is an essential example of the limits of acculturative adaptation in Korean society, by which international students' otherness must cater to Korean sensibilities. Otherwise, these individuals will be pushed away.

Theme 2: Feelings of Disappointment and Marginalization

Embracing Korean culture requires positive experiences to incentivize acculturation and adaptation. From the students' accounts, it appears that the host institutions, vis-à-vis universities, compound the acculturative stress experienced by international students. The two examples in this section are from individuals who expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of the services they received. Compared to newer students, one of them felt less supported and quite embittered about his university experience.

The first interviewed participant was Ahmed, and the level of his disappointment was evident right away. It appeared that Ahmed's particular school was one with a decreasing quality of education and value.

> *"The best year was my first year because my department was brand new. We had professors from Cambridge, Stanford, and Harvard and got great experience and knowledge. When they left our university, the next professors who came did not have great teaching skills. From my second year, my satisfaction decreased."*

Ahmed's university experience started with novelty and great expectations, yet the quality of instruction decreased as it progressed. Ahmed admitted that he expected his Korean university to be closer to his idea of a Westernized institution. Like other participants, Ahmed believed that Korea was a steppingstone to advance one's career to gain knowledge and opportunities that were absent in one's home country. Korea fell short of Ahmed's expectations, especially when he realized that domestic Korean students had fewer restrictions and requirements to enter the same university.

> *A: I thought I needed an IELTS certificate to be accepted into my university. But then I saw Koreans enter without an IELTS and my level of English skills. Where is the justice? It is not fair.*
> *C: Some Korean students' level of English is relatively low.*
> *A: But if there is a rule for students, why is this rule not for all? Koreans should enter this university with the IELTS certificate at that level, and this university is for all students, not a different category of students.*

Ahmed was incredibly resentful of the deferential treatment of domestic students relative to his status as an international. It was not fair that his acceptance required an English proficiency test that appeared to be irrelevant, given the low proficiency of his Korean classmates. The institutional inconsistency compounded his disappointment; not only did his university fall short of his ideal, but the policies also marginalized him. Attending a Korean university that found ways to reduce costs made him realize the unfairness of a system that refused to provide the value of the education he was supposed to receive.

> *"I saw a professor teaching programming for one semester; the next semester, he taught writing and reading. That is not fair. The university should hire more high-quality professors and specific professors— for example, an IT professor who only teaches IT and no other classes. The university should not lie to the students if they are taking these programs because they are paying."*

Ahmed's criticisms of his university were an exception to the rest of the participants given the gravity of his negative descriptions of his university experiences. Nevertheless, other students who felt removed from the larger school community echoed his call for equal and fair treatment. Maya, a third-year student from India who was grateful to have access to the epistemic and sociocultural capital available in Korea, also felt marginalized.

> *"No one represents the international students at my university. I work at the dorm office, and right beside our office is the international student services office; there should be more information sent to us and more events that include us. I want more invitations, even if I cannot attend or am uninterested. I want information about what is happening in the university to feel a part of the culture."*

For Maya, her university experience is tarnished by encounters with policies that were exclusionary of international students. She felt she and her peers were always the last to know about extracurricular events and announcements. Although she was fluent in Korean and had a wide range of Korean contacts, she thought the frequent

miscommunication between university staff and international students strained relations between both parties, with international students feeling quite bitter.

> *"When students come here, they usually have an image of Korea that they are fond of, and they want to know about the culture. But talking to such students who have been here for a while, they are bitter about their experiences. That is due to miscommunication and needing more information."*

Maya and Ahmed are examples of students who are unhappy with their university's policies, albeit to different degrees. Even if Ahmed was unfairly critical, his feelings of marginalization and of how he was treated differently from Korean students, are like Maya's. Unlike Ahmed, who frequently reminded the researcher of the immense cultural distances between Uzbekistan and Korea, Maya was willing to adapt to Korean culture and overcome her acculturative stress. However, both students felt that their university could do better.

5. DISCUSSION

This study revealed that marginalization and negative alterity are part of the acculturation experience in Korean higher education The quantitative results provide a tentative connection between dissatisfaction and disappointment with year of study, consistent with the findings of Park and Noh (2018). Maya's account significantly explains how someone acculturated in Korean society would be unhappy with his or her education. Although accounts of discrimination are replete in the current literature on this subject, it would be unwise to interpret the international experience as determined only by racism and discrimination. Most of the students in this study levied their most vehement criticisms against the host institution, not the host culture. Except for Ahmed, the other thirteen students were grateful for their Korean cultural experience. The participants were mainly unhappy that they were marginalized from the in-group communities of their university; they complained about the systemic failure of administrators to communicate relevant information. Students who have been in Korea for more than a year have had experiences of friendship and leisure to help with their adaptation (Kim, Park, Kim, Kim, & Kim, 2021b) and newly arrived participants were satisfied with their encounters with the local Korean culture.

The qualitative results showed the participants' positive attitudes toward their overall social experiences, especially their encounters with the host culture and local people. Sam and Maya are concrete examples of students who benefited from Korean contact, demonstrating the importance of Korean support systems in fostering acculturation (Lee & Bailey, 2020). A critical factor was the students adopting a more open attitude toward Korean values; the reduction of acculturative stress and a higher degree of satisfaction corresponded with an open attitude and a desire to integrate into Korean society (Merola et al., 2019). Although Sam and Maya had a higher linguistic and cultural interest, they revealed the current limits of Korean multiculturalism, especially when considering the insight from the regression tests. Older students like Sam and Maya are familiar with Korean culture, and even if they have acquired a deep cultural understanding (Kim, Park, Kim, Chow, & Han, 2021a) they are less interested in developing their linguistic and cultural competence. As a student approaches matriculation, the acculturation process might be one of decoupling. Senior students are no longer invested in their host country's culture. More gravely, Sam's story confirms the principal finding of Denney and Green (2021) who found limits to integrating sojourners into Korean society. Marginalization and negative alterity appear to be ineluctable features of students' acculturative journeys. As they move closer to graduation, these students recognize the consequences of living in Korea as a foreigner. Korean universities and significant segments of Korean society can only be seen as tourist attractions, regardless of their open-mindedness.

When combined, the quantitative and qualitative findings describe a preliminary narrative acculturation for the study participants that show the convergence of length of stay and feelings of marginalization. The multiple regression tests show that senior students who have spent more time in Korea and have more knowledge and experience of their institution are less interested in Korean culture and language. The qualitative analysis revealed the depth of their dissatisfaction by showing how senior students shared similar feelings of marginalization as they

became more familiar with Korea. This is consistent with the findings of Merola et al. (2019) which demonstrated a positive correlation between integration and acculturative stress (Sam, 2006). Integrated students like Maya and Sam reported less stress, irrespective of their country of origin (Berry, 2006a). The qualitative findings of this paper are in line with those of Jung (2022) providing further evidence that positive experiences correlate with lower rates of acculturative stress. Examples of acculturative stress were given by students of color, such as participants Dhruv, Serena, and Sam, who all experienced discrimination and cultural frustration. Sam only surmounted by assimilating to the tenets of Korean standards, without which he would be pushed away. These students' narratives align with criticisms about the lack of accommodation for international students in Korea and the systemic discrimination they experienced (Berry, 2006b; Kim, 2020; Lee et al., 2017; Santos, 2020). The quantitative and qualitative data demonstrate how the year of study in Korean universities indicates a collective dimension of marginalization and a lack of mutual accommodation. Figure 1 is a graphic representation of the year of study variable in Korean universities. This correlates with a reduction of student interest in Korean culture, language and feelings of support.
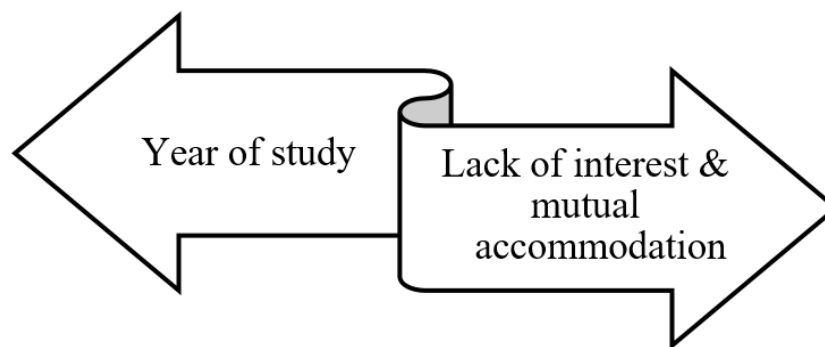

Figure 1. International students decoupling from Korean culture over time.

6. LIMITATIONS

While host tertiary institutions play a salient role in the acculturation outcome of their international students, the students' negative perceptions of their experiences are strictly irreducible to the policy decisions of university administrators. The complaints against the host institution and Korean culture have been documented here, but it is important to recognize the small sample size, which prevents generalization of the entire international student population in Korea. Both the quantitative and qualitative data were based on interviews and comments of self-reported subjective accounts from a limited sample population in the larger spectrum of sojourner experiences. In particular, there is the issue of demographics; a significant portion of the sample population were Uzbeks, and nearly half of the participants were new to Korea. At best, the data and subsequent analysis are provisional representations of international student experiences.

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Insofar as the goal was to map out the conditions of international students' acculturative stress in Korea, the experiences shared here indicate the fundamental steps to making positive institutional and governmental policy changes. For many participants, sources of community and integration were not readily available from their university. However, one study in Australia showed improved student satisfaction and well-being when the institution prioritizes acculturation (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Establishing an active support community increases student engagement and promotes intercultural understanding (Korobova & Starobin, 2015). A support network mitigates the adverse effects of acculturative anxiety, and a broader sense of community experienced by students leads to greater reports of student satisfaction (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Support systems facilitate intercultural education. One study has shown how mentorship programs have aided students with their struggles in their host country and helped overcome sociolinguistic-related difficulties (Penman et al., 2021). In Korea, a recent example of

positive integration was found by Kim et al. (2021b) showing that acculturative stress can be reduced by promoting leisure and friendship activities to improve international students' well-being and foster a deeper appreciation of Korean culture. Although there are many existing challenges, developing a multicultural program can quickly begin with inclusive policies and community-building programs that promote diversity and intercultural understanding. Recruitment tactics should be accompanied by acculturation programs that accommodate cultural differences and encourage multicultural inclusion (Kim, 2020; Sam, 2006; Walton, 2020).

8. CONCLUSION

Past studies on the acculturative process in Korean higher education have established a positive correlation between integration and cultural and linguistic competence (Jung, 2022; Merola et al., 2019). However, the quantitative results of this study found a negative correlation between the year of study and cultural interest, while the qualitative findings revealed the students' perceptions of marginalization and their experiences of discrimination and institutional dissatisfaction. The interviews uncovered the unfortunate fact that cultural integration is insufficient. Well-acculturated students, who were culturally and linguistically competent, complained about institutional marginalization that lowered the value of their educational experience. More gravely, it became apparent to one senior student that his alterity, his identity as a non-Korean, is accepted by some Koreans only as a form of tourist attraction, and a few students reported their experiences of implicit discrimination as students of color. The lesson from the explanatory analysis of this study is that Korea's multicultural policy requires a broader implementation of community and support and for universities to take further measures to accommodate international students.

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