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From Campus to Society: How University Newspapers and Mainstream News Frame International Students in South Korea

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ABSTRACT: *This study analyzes media discourse on international students in South Korea, comparing university newspapers (n=3,761) and mainstream news (n=38,167) between 1990 and 2025, using topic modeling and sentiment analysis. University news frames international students as integrated community members, emphasizing support, festivals, and cultural exchange with positive tones. Mainstream news portrays them as external risks involving geopolitics, crime, and disease, reflecting negative sentiment. While coverage by institutional media has decreased over time, coverage by mainstream media has increased, leading to heightened public interest in international students. Drawing on framing theory, the analysis shows how mainstream news outlets construct symbolic boundaries, positioning students as outsiders during crises. From a social-*

ecological perspective, these portrayals operate across interpersonal and institutional layers to shape policy and lived experiences. The findings suggest that universities, policymakers, and the media must coordinate strategies to highlight international students' contributions to demographic and economic diversity, challenging the negative framing that marginalizes this population and exacerbates social exclusion.

Keywords: Framing, International Students, Media Discourse, Sentiment Analysis, Social-Ecological Model, South Korea, Topic Modeling

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INTRODUCTION

The number of international students has been increasing over time with the expansion of cross-border mobility in higher education. As of 2022, there were approximately 6.9 million international students worldwide (Migration Data Portal, 2024). South Korea (hereafter Korea) was once a major sending country for international students, but since the 2000s, it has emerged as a significant destination for international higher education (Kang et al., 2022). This shift was driven mainly by government-led policies, such as the “Study Korea 300K Project,” which aimed to attract 300,000 international students by expanding scholarships, improving education quality, and enhancing global competitiveness in higher education to combat declining domestic enrollment due to low fertility rates (Ministry of Education, 2023). In addition to these policy-driven pull factors, the global popularity of the Korean Wave has further enhanced Korea’s attractiveness among international students (Suratmi, 2023; Takeda, 2020). As a result, the number of international students increased from 16,832 in 2004 to 208,962 in 2024. This represents an increase of nearly 12.4 times within just two decades. Most of them come from neighboring Asian countries, such as China, Vietnam, Uzbekistan, Mongolia, and Japan (Korean Educational Development

Institute [KEDI], 2025), positioning Korea as “a hub of inter-Asian mobilities” (Feyissa & Sherpa, 2025).

The vast majority of studies on international students in Korea have concentrated on individual-level outcomes, such as academic challenges and adjustment (Ge & Yoon, 2025; Vanchinkhuu & Shin, 2023), cultural adaptation and acculturative stress (Atteraya, 2021; Jung, 2023; Kim et al., 2021), and mental health issues (Suh et al., 2019; Ying et al., 2025). Methodologically, these studies usually rely on small-scale surveys, interviews, or focus group discussions. Another body of literature has examined the use of international students as a strategy to address regional population decline and the crisis in higher education enrollment rates, primarily by utilizing legal and policy documents (Aguiar et al., 2024; Minaeva et al., 2024; Park, 2025; Weber et al., 2024). However, given that international students are embedded within not only higher education institutions but also the broader receiving society, meso- and macrolevel investigations that extend beyond individual experiences are needed.

This study draws on the social-ecological model (SEM), which emphasizes that individuals are embedded in the interpersonal connections, organizations, communities, and social environments they inhabit (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Golden et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2025; Kilanowski, 2017). According to this framework, how universities and receiving societies represent and discuss international students plays a critical role in shaping their experiences. In Korea’s racially and ethnically homogeneous context (Kim-Bossard, 2018), examining these portrayals is critical because the media not only reflects but also influences public perceptions of belonging and social membership. Despite increasing scholarly attention to international students in Korea, little is known about how they have been portrayed across different media contexts over time, including during periods such as financial crises and the COVID-19 pandemic.

University newspapers differ from commercialized mainstream news outlets because they are published within academic institutions, address campus and regional agendas, provide academic and nonacademic information, and provide platforms for students’ opinion expression (Kim, 2024; Son, 2000; Sparks et al., 2024; van der Rijt, 2023). Therefore, they frame international students through the lens of campus life and academic integration. In contrast, mainstream news outlets operate at the societal level, shaping public perception and influencing policy debates (Bohmert et al., 2018; Chermak, 1995). They often portray international students with broader social concerns, such as demographic shifts, labor market demands, or perceived national security issues, positioning them beyond the campus (Anderson, 2020).

This study examines how discourses about international students are framed differently in campus (institutional-level) versus broader societal (national-level) news using topic modeling and sentiment analysis on articles collected from university newspapers and mainstream news outlets (1990–2025). By analyzing topical prevalence, temporal trends, and sentiment distributions, we aim to present key contrasts to inform policies that bridge these differences and promote the integration of international students.

We analyze news articles rather than international students' own voices. However, the discourse frameworks that differ between university newspapers and mainstream news outlets are not detached from their experiences. Public discourse regarding specific groups influences how their members are perceived in daily interactions, how policies targeting them are designed and justified, and how they themselves interpret their position within their resident society (Esses et al., 2013; Hall, 1997). With respect to international students in Korea, who navigate campus life and broader Korean society at the same time, the gap between supportive institutional framing and risk-oriented societal framing is itself a feature of their lived environment. By documenting this gap empirically, we aim to contribute to the international student literature by mapping the discursive ecology that surrounds students' daily experiences of belonging and inclusion and by showing where universities, policymakers, and media practitioners can intervene.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Students in Korea

Despite the steady increase in international students coming to Korea, relatively little attention has been given to their life experiences and native Koreans' perceptions of their social belonging. Several studies have shown that international students in Korea often face challenges in adaptation, such as academic performance, because of cultural differences, language barriers, and discrimination (Choi, 2018; Suh et al., 2019; Santos, 2020; Usman et al., 2026).

Research on international students in Korea consistently highlights negative social experiences, including discrimination, depression, and academic struggles, particularly among Asian cohorts. For example, Min (2017) reported pervasive discrimination in student diaries, a trend exacerbated post-COVID-19 by negative perceptions regarding the virus's origin (Koo et al., 2023). Mental health remains a concern, especially among Vietnamese students, who often necessitate medical consultation (Kwak, 2022). Furthermore, university support professionals identify systemic barriers against international students, including language, financial problems, discrimination, and social prejudice (Oh & Lee, 2018). These findings suggest that international students' everyday life and adaptation are closely related to societal perceptions.

Studies on Koreans' perceptions of international students have revealed a tendency toward negative or distancing attitudes (Lee & Bailey, 2020; Min et al., 2019). Kang (2016), using a college student sample, classified the perceptions of international students and reported that negative categories, such as rejection (21.9%) and avoidance (37.5%), were more prevalent than positive ones, including partial (25%) and full acceptance (15.6%). Min et al. (2019) also reported that domestic students tended to view international students, especially those from neighboring Asian countries such as China, Vietnam, and Thailand, as obstacles and were reluctant to collaborate or socialize with them. Domestic students also expressed resentment that institutional resources, such as

scholarships and dormitory placements, were reserved primarily for international students (Lim et al., 2015). In summary, previous studies have shown negative perceptions and discriminatory attitudes toward international students, indicating that these negatively contribute to and exacerbate the daily difficulties they face in Korea. Importantly, these perceptions are not only experienced at the interpersonal level but may also be shaped, reinforced, or amplified through their mediated circulation and framing in the public sphere.

Framing theory

Framing theory offers a useful lens for examining how media construct social reality. Entman (1993, p. 52) defined a frame as “selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.” In this sense, framing is not merely about transmitting information but also about organizing meaning and legitimizing specific interpretations. By analyzing how the media construct international students’ social realities, we can identify the issues they emphasize and examine how these differ across media types or over time. This aligns with early framing analyses that show how news discourses assign responsibility and moral judgment through problem definitions and proposed solutions (d’Haenens & de Lange, 2001).

Previous research has applied framing theory to minority groups. Studies on immigration and refugees show that the media often frame migrants as contributors, emphasizing their economic or cultural value, or as threats, linking them to labor market pressures, criminality, or public health risks (Eberl et al., 2018; Harris & Gruenewald, 2020; Heidenreich et al., 2019; Lawlor & Tolley, 2017). Using a frame analysis of international students in Canada, Anderson (2020) reported that the Canadian media portrayed international students as both threats and commodities while representing Canada as an ideal and benevolent destination. Such studies show that frames do not neutrally reflect reality but actively position groups as insiders or outsiders within the social order (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). Similarly, Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) show that framing practices in the European mediascape delineate boundaries of community and belonging, often reinforcing the marginalization or visibility of migrants. Quantitative research using topic modeling has illustrated how newspapers across different countries frame crises (Van Dooremalen & Uitermark, 2021).

These findings suggest that framing may vary by media outlet, political orientation, national context, and time (Eberl et al., 2018; Gasparyan & Sirotkina, 2025; Heidenreich et al., 2019). This research is relevant to international students in Korea because it helps explain how media construct their social realities across platforms and historical periods. Institutional-level representations further reveal how digital connectivity enables international students to negotiate locality and belonging within host societies, suggesting that institutional contexts can foster more integrated portrayals (Martin & Rizvi, 2014). For example, university newspapers may frame international students as integrated members of the

campus community by highlighting their participation in festivals, exchange programs between international students' home and receiving countries, and support services for them. In contrast, mainstream media outlets tend to portray international students negatively by associating them with public health concerns, especially during periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Importantly, this trend is not solely determined by the type of media but can change over time. Government policies encouraging cultural exchange through international students promote positive portrayals, whereas geopolitical tensions or social unrest can evoke risk-oriented and exclusionary perspectives. Therefore, the institutional nature of the media outlet and the temporal and social context, rather than the individual characteristics of the students, are likely to influence how international students are depicted.

Social-ecological model

SEM provides a well-established theoretical framework for analyzing how individual behaviors and outcomes are influenced by multiple, interacting layers of the social environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; McLeroy et al., 1988). The framework emphasizes that individuals are embedded within nested systems, ranging from personal attributes to societal structures that collectively shape their opportunities, risks, and adaptations. In recent decades, SEM has been increasingly applied to international migration (Hawkins et al., 2021; Moyce et al., 2023), offering a multidimensional perspective that is particularly useful for understanding international student mobility.

Prior research highlights language proficiency, cultural adaptability, and academic preparedness as key determinants of international student success at the individual level (Andrade, 2006; Kim & Lee, 2025). Students' coping strategies, self-efficacy, and resilience also mitigate acculturation-related stress (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). At the interpersonal level, peer networks, mentoring relationships, and faculty interactions provide support but can also be sites of exclusion (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Lee & Rice, 2007), shaping students' isolation, belonging and academic engagement. At the institutional level, university policies and support resources mediate integration; inclusive messaging, orientation programs, housing assistance, and academic advice improve retention and satisfaction (Marginson, 2013; Rienties & Nolan, 2014), whereas fragmented or instrumental efforts increase alienation and dropout risk (Zhou & Todman, 2009). Institutional discourses, such as university news outlets, often frame international students as contributors to campus diversity and global engagement (Cantwell et al., 2009). Beyond campuses, community and societal contexts also shape public perceptions. Attitudes toward migration, mediated by political and media discourse, condition students' daily experiences (Robertson, 2011). Studies in Western and East Asian settings document securitized or instrumental portrayals emphasizing economic utility, cultural difference, and risk factors such as crime and disease (Tran & Vu, 2018). Such representations reinforce stereotypes and promote xenophobia while shaping immigrants' perceived discrimination and sense of belonging (Sherry et al., 2010).

SEM also allows for a temporal and structural perspective, recognizing that systems evolve and exert varying pressures over time. In Korea, government initiatives such as Brain Korea 21 (BK21), government-funded programs that support graduate education and research to cultivate high-level academic talent, and Study Korea 300K were designed to expand the international student population in response to declining domestic enrollment and labor shortages (Byun & Kim, 2010). While these efforts facilitated rapid growth in international student mobility, they also intersected with societal anxieties about international migration, creating a divergence between institutional promotion and public skepticism. Media discourse has amplified this divergence, with mainstream news increasingly framing international students through risk-oriented frames, especially during geopolitical tensions, public health crises, and economic downturns. Similar patterns have been observed in broader immigration debates, where policy communication, media framing, and public deliberation interact to produce uncertainty and contested sense-making (Balch & Balabanova, 2011). With respect to SEM, scholars can more thoroughly account for the balance between protective factors (e.g., supportive infrastructure and peer networks) and risk factors (e.g., negative media representations and discrimination). This multilevel perspective suggests the need for integrated strategies such as individual-level language and academic support, interpersonal mentoring, institutional commitments to diversity, and societal campaigns to reduce stereotypes and encourage inclusive narratives. Ultimately, applying SEM highlights that international student mobility is not merely individual adaptation but also an evolving process mediated by intersecting social, institutional, and cultural forces.

Bringing the two frameworks together, we treat SEM as specifying *where* framing operates and framing theory as specifying *how* meaning is constructed at each level. University newspapers correspond to SEM's institutional level and frame international students through proximate, support-oriented categories (events, services). Mainstream news corresponds to two levels (i.e., the exosystem and the macrosystem) and frames the same population group through different categories associated with risks such as national interests, international relations, public health, and crime. Therefore, the two analytical frameworks provide complementary predictions. While SEM predicts which information sources will generate which frames, framing theory explains the discursive mechanisms involved in these sources, defining international students as insiders or outsiders, such as problem definition, interpretation of causality, and moral evaluation. This combined logic guides our research design (comparing two clearly distinct ecological levels), our analytic choices (topic modeling to recover problem definitions, sentiment analysis to recover moral and emotional evaluations), and our interpretation of the findings.

DATA AND METHODS

Data

We collected news articles from university newspapers and mainstream online news outlets. All the collected articles were written in Korean, allowing us to analyze the discourses in their original linguistic and cultural contexts.

First, from university newspapers, we collected 3,761 articles containing the keyword “international student (Yu-hak-saeng)” from 18 South Korean universities. These institutions were selected from the country’s top 20 universities in Korea with the largest international student population. Owing to access limitations at two of these institutions, the final dataset comprises the remaining 18 universities. All the articles containing the keywords were collected, covering the period from September 1997 to April 2025. Next, for the mainstream news outlets, we collected 38,167 Korean news articles from the news database, using the same keyword “international student (Yu-hak-saeng).” The articles were published between January 1990 and July 2025.

University newspapers are typically published by student reporters from an internal institutional perspective, whereas mainstream online news outlets are published by professional journalists from an external societal perspective. This contrast allowed us to examine how the same topic was framed differently across insider and outsider narratives.

Topic modeling

To assign and analyze topics in news articles, we used BERTopic, which generates document embeddings with a pretrained transformer-based language model that supports Korean, enabling us to process articles in their original language. The embeddings were clustered, and topic representations were derived using class-based TF-IDF (Grootendorst, 2022). To determine the number of topics, we compared the silhouette score for 4 to 10 topics. The silhouette score ranges from -1 to 1, with higher values indicating better cluster separation and fit. Seven topics achieved the highest score: 4 topics = 0.15, 5=0.23, 6=0.31, 7=0.40, 8=0.35, 9=0.33, and 10=0.27. We therefore selected the seven-topic solution and further reviewed the topic keywords and representative articles to confirm interpretability. Articles not initially classified into one of the seven topics were reassigned using Faiss (Douze et al., 2025), a library for efficient similarity search that assigns articles to the nearest topic centroid on the basis of vector distance. This prevents data loss and ensures that the entire corpus is included in the model. This procedure was applied separately to university newspapers and mainstream news outlets, producing seven-topic solutions for each source.

Sentiment Analysis

Next, we applied the Korean version of the GoEmotion model (Demszky et al., 2020) at the article level by assigning a single emotion label to each article.

The GoEmotion model is a BERT-based classifier originally designed to categorize text into 27 emotions or neutral emotions. In this study, we used a Korean-adapted version trained on the KOTE dataset (Korean Online Text Emotion) (Jeon et al., 2024), which enables emotion recognition specifically for Korean texts. Instead of translating the articles into English and applying the original model, we used this fine-tuned version directly to preserve the linguistic and cultural nuances of Korean emotional expressions. Following the original GoEmotions framework, we grouped 27 emotions into three higher-level categories: negative (e.g., anger, disgust, sadness), positive (e.g., admiration, happiness, relief), and ambiguous (e.g., surprise, confusion, and realization). We use these macro categories as a complementary layer, not as a replacement for the fine-grained labels, to summarize broader emotional polarity patterns while preserving emotion-level analyses. We interpret these grouped results together with the 27-label distributions to avoid overgeneralizing across distinct emotions within the same category.

FINDINGS

Trends in News Coverage Over Time

The overall volume of news article coverage over time for university news (school level) and mainstream news (society level) is presented in Figure 1. This provides context for understanding how attention to the topic evolves and may be influenced by policy shifts, global events, and media dynamics. Institutional-level news about international students, shown in the upper panel of Figure 1, shows a rising–peak–declining pattern, with growth concentrated in the 2000s–2010s (coinciding with policy-driven enrollment booms) and a post-2020 drop, likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This suggests that university media respond to internal cycles, such as admission targets or campus disruptions (e.g., COVID-19-related closures reducing event-based reporting). In contrast, the lower panel of Figure 1 shows that mainstream news exhibited a largely linear upward trend with no decline, indicating that growing societal salience is likely driven by increasing public interest in international students amid a rapidly aging population, rising university vacancies, and digital amplification.

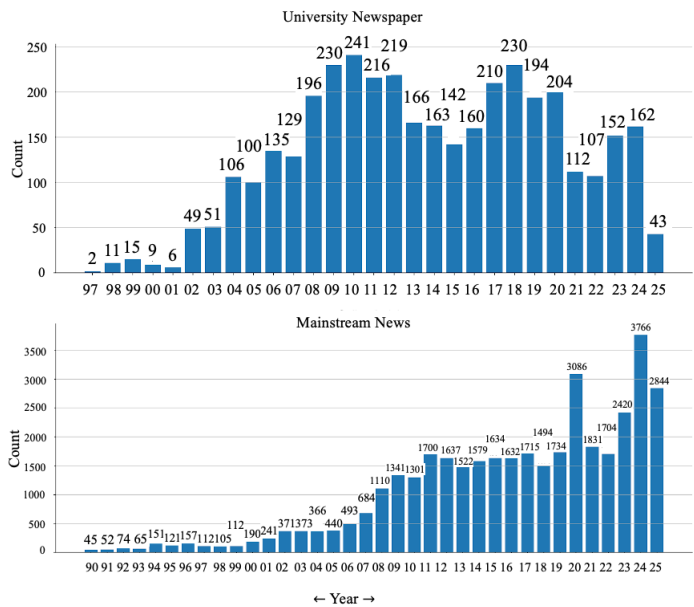


Figure 1: Number of University Newspapers and Mainstream News by Year

Topics emerged around international students

The topics emerging from university news coverage of international students are predominantly inward-facing and integration-oriented. This topical pattern highlights the emphasis of institutional-level media on building communities and supporting the adaptation of international students. For instance, the leading topic, “Campus Festivals and Cultural Events” (32%), positions students as active contributors to an engaged campus life, exemplified by events such as the Sunghsin Arts Festival or Global Fairs that blend local and international elements. This promotes cross-cultural participation and reduces isolation. Similarly, another topic, “International Students and Exchange Programs” (24%), highlights institutional mechanisms for inclusion, such as language support and exchange initiatives, framing challenges such as language barriers as solvable through university-led efforts rather than inherent deficits.

"Tuition Fees and Scholarships" (20%) and "Student Elections and Voting" (10%) further emphasize inward-facing administrative and participatory issues, where financial burdens are addressed via scholarships and governance gaps are critiqued to advocate for better representation, such as international student councils. These topics reflect a discourse of empowerment and equity within the institutional bubble, in contrast to the potential societal view of international students as an economic drain.

The “COVID-19 and Campus Response” topic (7%) illustrates a reactive, protective framing during crises, with universities implementing quarantines and

online shifts and supporting resources to safeguard international students and portraying them as vulnerable yet valued members requiring institutional care. Minor but telling topics such as “Campus Dining and Dietary Options” (4%) and “Student Housing and Dormitories” (3%) delve into everyday logistics, such as halal menus or smoke-free dorms, reinforcing a narrative of practical accommodations that humanize students and support their adaptation to Korean campus norms.

In contrast, topics that emerged in mainstream news are concentrated in macro external factors, with “International Relations and Countries” (77.9%) accounting for the largest share of coverage. Mainstream news often embeds international students within geopolitical narratives, such as the isolation of Chinese students amid U.S.–China tensions or Vietnamese enrollment surges tied to bilateral educational agreements. This framework tends to position students in relation to their countries of origin and to broader concerns about migration flows and national security. “Crime and Drug Enforcement” (7.6%) covers incidents involving international students as either perpetrators or victims, while these articles constitute a small share of overall coverage, they show stereotyping of foreign nationals. We note that this is a tendency observed in the corpus rather than a uniform pattern across all online outlets.

“Finance and Communication Services” (6.0%) and “Infectious Diseases and Public Health” (5.4%) further emphasize economic and health risks, with stories on remittances, regulatory changes (e.g., China's forex rules), and outbreaks (e.g., COVID-19 quarantines), positioning students as vectors of financial strain or contagion that require societal oversight. Less frequently emerging topics such as “health and insurance” (1.2%) highlight gaps in coverage, such as inadequate medical support. Moreover, “Korean culture and lifestyle” (1.0%) offered rare positive glimpses into cultural consumption (e.g., K-beauty scams or fan experiences), although they were often commodified. Finally, “AI and Employment” (0.9%) signals emerging future-oriented themes, focusing on training international students for tech-driven jobs, yet still framed externally as part of Korea's global competitiveness.

In university newspapers (Figure 2, top), the focus on campus festivals and exchange programs in the late 1990s and early 2000s shifted over time to growing concerns about tuition, scholarships, and housing, signaling a move from cultural engagement to financial and welfare priorities among students. Conversely, mainstream news, shown in the lower panel of Figure 2, emphasizes international relations, with brief spikes such as infectious diseases during the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating that public media often frames international students through the lens of global politics, crises, and national interests. In summary, the media reflects the changing lived experiences and practical needs of students, whereas mainstream news highlights external events and policy contexts, potentially overshadowing the everyday realities of international students.

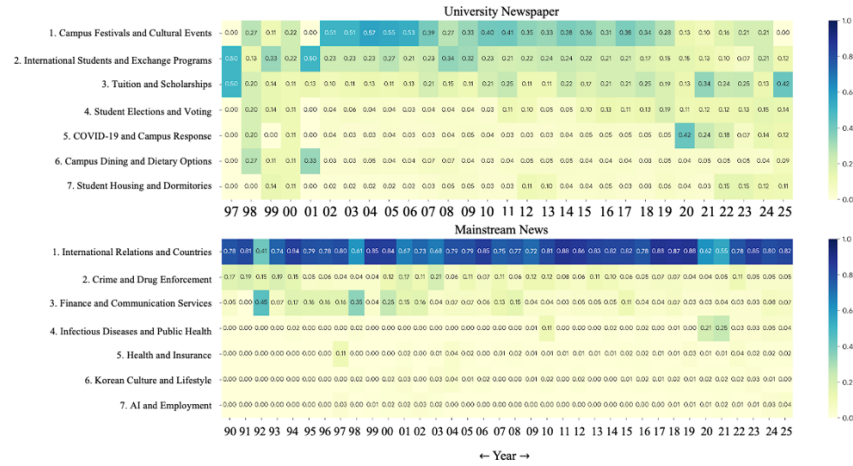


Figure 2: Yearly Topic Distribution in University Newspapers and Mainstream News Articles

Sentiment analysis

Starting with positive emotions, university newspapers tend to display stronger and more frequent positive associations than mainstream online news outlets do. Emotions such as optimism, relief, and admiration appear with notable intensity across multiple topics. In contrast, positive framing emerges weakly in mainstream online news outlets. This tendency may reflect university newspapers' role in fostering a supportive campus environment and highlighting students' success stories. Their readership is primarily students, faculty, and alumni (Shin, 2022), which may encourage narratives that emphasize resilience and community solidarity. In contrast, mainstream online news outlets may lack this institutional or community-building incentive, leading to less frequent positive framing.

With respect to negative emotions, we found that online news emphasizes negative sentiments more strongly than university newspapers do. In particular, nervousness appears with strong intensity across a wide range of topics in mainstream online news outlets, whereas university newspapers are more likely to highlight disappointment. Nervousness in mainstream online news outlets may reflect broader societal anxieties about immigration, labor markets, or geopolitical uncertainty, framing international students within narratives of risk or instability. Moreover, disappointment in university newspapers could be more localized, stemming from unmet expectations about campus resources, academic adjustments, or social integration, thus reflecting concerns closer to students' everyday experiences.

Finally, ambiguous emotions occurred less frequently than positive or negative emotions did in both groups. However, university newspapers show the emergence of realization, possibly tied to student learning, increased awareness, and critical reflection on campus diversity issues. In contrast, mainstream news

often conveys confusion and surprise. These emotions may point to the public's uncertainty or lack of familiarity with international students' experiences, particularly when events involving them unexpectedly enter mainstream news.

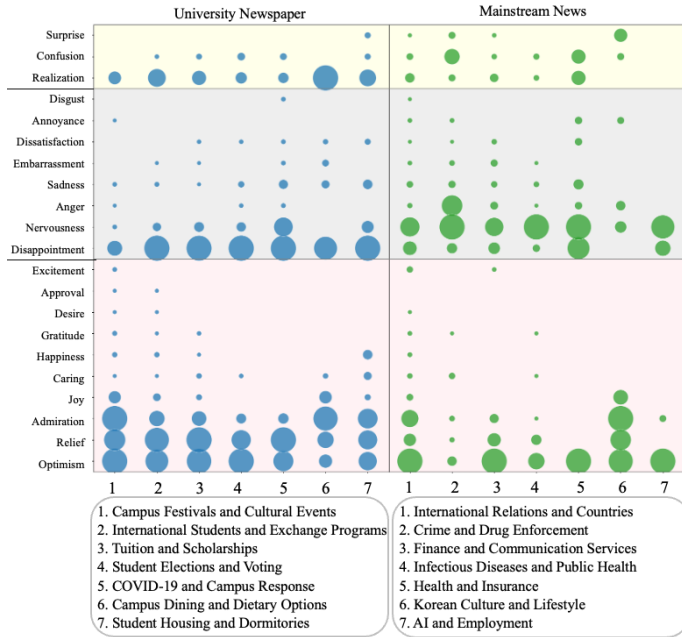


Figure 3: Emotion-Topic Associations in University Newspapers and Mainstream News Articles

Note. The blue bubbles represent university newspaper topics, and the green bubbles represent mainstream news topics. Emotions are grouped into positive (bottom), negative (middle), and ambiguous (top) categories following Goemotions (Demszky et al., 2020). Bubble size indicates the strength of the frequency of each topic–emotion association, with larger bubbles representing stronger associations.

DISCUSSIONS

Our results reveal how university newspapers and mainstream news portray international students differently in Korea, a newly emerging destination country. University newspapers treat students as part of the campus community and frame their presence through support and participation. This inward nature of university media stands in stark contrast to mainstream news discourse, which is more outward-facing and negatively portrays international students as a potential risk for national security. This difference suggests that while the campus media acts as a shield by fostering inclusive discourse that enhances the institution's

reputation, it fails to adequately address broader issues such as xenophobia or economic exploitation. Although these topics around international students have changed over time, the fundamental differences in reporting content regarding international students between university newspapers and mainstream news have not changed. These findings highlight how media type dictates the symbolic boundaries drawn around international students within the receiving society.

The result of the sentiment analyses present similar patterns. University newspapers capture student-centric emotions such as caring and relief. In contrast, in mainstream news, anger predominates and is usually attached to economic or political stories. Framing theory (Entman, 1993) helps interpret these patterns. University newspapers pair topics such as tuition and student elections with relief and optimism, reflecting day-to-day campus concerns. Mainstream news attaches anger to international relations and infectious disease coverage and optimism to stories about AI and employment. The framing in the second case has more to do with national interests and crisis reporting than with student life as such. These differences in framing among media platforms contribute to distinct audience perceptions and emotional responses among international students.

University newspapers emphasize personal, experiential, and community-oriented narratives within an institutional ecology that promotes adaptation and belonging. Topics such as campus festivals, cultural events, and exchange programs highlight mechanisms of integration, positioning students as active participants in multicultural exchanges and addressing challenges such as language barriers through structured support. Administrative themes such as tuition, scholarships, and student governance are framed inwardly, emphasizing equity, care, and empowerment. These discourses align with the institutional level of SEM, where universities create environments that strengthen resilience, cultural inclusion, and participation. Within this campus ecology, international students are discursively recognized as valued contributors rather than outsiders, which is consistent with the literature emphasizing the protective role of supportive school climates (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Marginson, 2013).

In contrast, mainstream news representations focus on macrosystem concerns, embedding international students within broader discourses on international relations, crime, finance, and public health. Students are framed less as individuals and more as proxies for geopolitical shifts, economic risks, and threats to social order. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) exosystem and macrosystem levels, where distal forces such as government policies, media framing, and migration anxieties influence students' lived experiences without direct involvement. Such coverage often amplifies negative emotions, including anxiety, conflict, and danger, reinforcing societal stereotypes and contributing to the stigmatization of international students as risky or burdensome. What matters here is the tension between the two levels. International students inevitably move between the campus and the wider receiving society, but they also move between two discursive environments that do not truly speak to each other.

This multilevel discrepancy we found suggests several implications. First, universities should strengthen institutional support while highlighting narratives of contribution, resilience, and diversity to counterbalance societal framing.

Beyond language and academic assistance, universities can shape public narratives by disseminating success stories, highlighting intercultural collaboration, and integrating international students into leadership and governance structures, thereby repositioning them as active contributors rather than passive recipients of support. Furthermore, universities can encourage mainstream news targeting the general public to publish editorials and feature articles concerning the contributions of international students. To this end, it would be beneficial for universities to provide data on enrollment rates, employment rates, and the impact on the local economy in a format that reporters can cite. In addition, these articles should be coauthored with international students so that they are featured as named sources rather than merely as background figures.

Second, for policymakers, the obvious lever is the language of their own communication. If policy documents and press releases approach international students primarily through visa compliance, dropout risk, or labor market protection, this will promote the risk-centric tendency observed in mainstream news reporting regarding international students. Even under the same policy, if neutral and positive expressions such as population growth, regional revitalization, and the training of skilled workers are used, journalists will be able to report from diverse perspectives without being confined within the framework of threats. Additionally, public communication strategies, including awareness campaigns, inclusive policy messaging, and cross-sector media partnerships, should challenge deficit-based narratives and emphasize the demographic, cultural, and economic benefits international students bring to host societies.

Finally, media organizations should maintain a list of information sources, including international student associations, multicultural support centers, and immigration researchers, and utilize international students as sources even if the topic of an article is not directly related to them. Furthermore, cooperation with various sectors, such as university public relations offices, journalism departments, and immigrant rights organizations, is important.

This study had several limitations. First, the comparison was limited to university newspapers and mainstream news, without accounting for the characteristics of other media platforms. TV, radio, and social networking (SNS) sites, where international students actively post and engage with domestic students and Korean citizens, were not included and lacked platform-specific dynamics. Second, although topic modeling and sentiment analysis allowed us to process a corpus that would be infeasible to read by hand, these methods have known limitations. BERTopic clustering depends on hyperparameter and embedding choices, and although our robustness checks produced stable solutions, alternative configurations could yield somewhat different topic boundaries. The KOTE-based emotion classifier was trained on Korean online text and tends to misclassify sarcasm, irony, and context-dependent expressions, and it inherits whatever biases sit in its training data. Computational methods also flatten subtle discursive nuances and power relations that close textual reading would surface, so our findings describe surface-level patterns of topical and emotional coverage rather than the full interpretive depth of media narratives.

Third, our analysis treats articles as the unit of analysis and does not capture how readers actually receive or contest these frames; reception studies would be needed to link media patterns directly to international students' sense of belonging.

Despite these limitations, this study has several strengths. The longitudinal design covers more than thirty years, spanning the pre- and post-internationalization periods and the COVID-19 pandemic, which provides a historical context that shorter-term studies cannot. Additionally, the comparative analyses of institutional and national discourses offer a unique micromacro perspective, highlighting how institutional narratives may buffer while societal narratives reinforce them, supported by large-scale data analysis.

On the basis of our findings, we suggest the following for future research. Future work could incorporate other traditional and emerging media platforms, such as TV, YouTube, SNS, and online communities frequented by international students, to compare the discourse across channels. Conducting qualitative research (e.g., interviews and focus groups) to explore the life experiences and perceptions of surrounding media representations among international students will be beneficial from a reception-centered perspective. Comparative research examining countries facing declining school-age populations (e.g., Japan and Taiwan) might reveal shared and country-specific patterns, and comparisons with traditional destination countries such as the United States or Europe would help clarify how the national context shapes media framing.

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