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“It’s My Fault”: Exploring Experiences and Mental Wellness Among Korean International Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT

Mental health issues are on the rise on college campuses for all students, including international students. This qualitative study explores the mental wellness of Korean international graduate students, a subgroup that has received limited attention. We found that limited English proficiency shapes various aspects of Korean international graduate students’ well-being; self-imposed pressures negatively influence mental wellness; self-blaming and an inability to express one’s feelings lead to further deterioration; and students turn to physical and religious or spiritual activities to improve their mental wellness. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: graduate students, holistic wellness model, Korean international students, mental health, qualitative study, well-being

INTRODUCTION

During the 2018–2019 academic year, the number of international students in the United States topped 1 million, representing 5.5% of the total U.S. college student population (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2020), and 45.3% of international students were enrolled in graduate degree programs. International students face many challenges. Living in a foreign country can lead to acculturative stress (i.e., stress from life changes through the acculturation process) and adjustment problems (Koo, Baker, & Yoon, 2021). Research has found that international students encounter language barriers, financial difficulties, difficulties adjusting to a new educational system and social customs, and homesickness (Koo, Baker, & Yoon, 2021; Koo, Nyunt, & Wang, 2021; Ma, 2020; Xing & Bolden, 2019). These challenges can impact mental well-being (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). Researchers estimate that 15%–20% of international students are at risk of mental health problems due to acculturative stress and acculturation-related problems (Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

In addition, international graduate students encounter unique academic and cultural difficulties while studying abroad (KarKar-Esperat, 2018; Rawlings & Sue, 2013). In addition to unique challenges of being an international student, while studying in a foreign country, international graduate students experience feelings of isolation and alienation, heavy pressure to write and publish, and difficulty communicating with advisors and colleagues (Byram & Feng, 2006; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Rawlings & Sue, 2013). These challenges contribute to depression and mental health issues (Hyun et al., 2007; Rawlings & Sue, 2013).

Much research on international students' mental health focuses on international students as a whole (e.g., Mori, 2000). While they share many commonalities due to immigration status and cultural adjustment, their attitudes toward mental well-being and help-seeking vary based on their cultural backgrounds (Mori, 2000). Few studies have explored the mental health of international students from a specific country and culture. Of the three largest international student populations in the United States—Chinese, Indian, and South Korean (33.7%, 18.4%, and 4.8%, respectively; IIE, 2020)—Chinese and Indian students have received greater scholarly attention (e.g., Chen et al., 2015), while Korean international students and their mental well-being have received little (J. S. Lee et al., 2004). Thus, a better understanding of their needs is required to support this population.

While studies on mental health among international students mainly point out that they experience higher rates of psychological problems and adjustment issues (Koo, 2021a; Chen et al., 2015), only few (e.g., J. Lee et al., 2019) present the perspective that the U.S.-centric culture of U.S. campuses may create unwelcoming, hostile, and unsafe environments for international students that affect adjustment negatively. Thus, we believe that it is necessary to observe campus environments and the overall political power dynamics that shape international students' experiences.

The purpose of this study is to explore Korean international graduate students' academic, professional, and personal experiences related to mental wellness. We limited participation to graduate students to focus on the unique professional and personal experiences of pursuing graduate studies in the United States.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mental health problems appear to have been increasing among college students for the past two decades (American College Health Association, 2001, 2020). While mental health issues are on the rise for all college students, marginalized students, such as those with minority racial or ethnic backgrounds, international status, or low socioeconomic status, are at a higher risk (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009) due to external factors, including limited resources and support, discrimination, and socioeconomic inequalities (Koo, 2021a; Utsey et al., 2014). This indicates the need to explore the mental well-being of different subpopulations. In addition to the limited research on Korean American and Korean international students, our study is guided by work on related populations: graduate students, international students as a whole, and Asian international students in particular.

International Students' Mental Wellness

International graduate students live not only as graduate students but also as foreigners. They face difficulties such as language barriers, acculturation stresses, and a lack of social interaction while adjusting to new educational and social environments (Koo, 2021b; Koo, Baker, & Yoon, 2021). Thus, they are more likely to experience higher rates of mental health challenges compared with their domestic peers (Koo, Baker, & Yoon., 2021; Mori, 2000), while showing lower rates of seeking professional help (Yoon & Jepsen, 2008), which has been tied to increased risk of developing mental health issues.

Researchers have found that language barriers may lead to stress (Luo et al., 2019), which may be especially problematic for Asian international students, who tend to have the greatest difficulty with English language use (Liu, 2009). Experiencing cultural differences in graduate school may also lead to academic and personal challenges that may impact mental well-being (Liu, 2009; Mori, 2000). Such differences may be particularly pronounced for students from collectivist cultures, including many Asian cultures, whose values may conflict with the individualistic culture at U.S. institutions (Liu, 2009; Mori, 2000).

Cultural differences may also impact international students' ability to form social relationships with American peers (Liu, 2009; Mori, 2000). The challenges of staying in touch with family and friends in their home country may further limit their social support networks (Koo, Yao, & Gong, 2021; Liu, 2009). Not surprisingly, they often seek relationships with other international students, but ethnic differences can lead to forming small cultural subgroups, further isolating certain students (Liu, 2009). A lack of social support and connectedness has been found to increase the risk of mental health problems among international students from collectivist cultures (Liu, 2009).

Though not unique to international students, stress over academic performance can impact mental well-being (Liu, 2009; Misra & Castillo, 2004; Mori, 2000). One study found that while self-imposed stress related to academic performance was greatest for American students, pressure created the most stress

for international students (Misra & Castillo, 2004). Pressure may come from families, relatives, friends, or sponsoring organizations or universities with unrealistic expectations (Mori, 2000). Wanting to excel academically may lead to spending more time studying, reducing social interaction (Jiang & Koo, 2020; Liu, 2009), which may exacerbate problems.

Korean International Students

While some research has focused on the mental health of Chinese, Japanese, or Indian international students (e.g., Chen et al., 2015; Liu, 2009; Luo et al., 2019), little is known about Korean international students. The few extant studies indicate that they are likely to experience similar mental health concerns as international and Asian American students. J. S. Lee and colleagues (2004) reported a strong association between social support, acculturation, and mental health among Korean international students. Studies found that they struggled to participate in college classes due to limited English skills and cultural differences in expectations (J. Kim, 2013; G. Lee, 2009). Other studies found that age and gender were associated with Korean international students' experiences of acculturative stress, with older and female students experiencing more stress than their younger and male counterparts (W. H. Kim & Ra, 2015; Ra, 2016). In addition, Korean students were found to seek professional mental health help less often than their U.S. peers (D. Lee et al., 2014)).

While the above findings provide valuable information, research on Korean international students' mental health remains limited. Thus, understanding Korean cultural values related to mental health and Korean students' experiences is important. It has been noted that Korean culture has unique characteristics related to mental health, including tolerance and suppression of personal emotion (D. Lee et al., 2014; Park et al, 2013). In addition, Kim and Wolpin (2008) reported Korean cultural values of collectivism, emotional restraint, conformity to norms, humility, and fear about failing. To identify unique experiences and cultural values related to Korean international students' mental health, there is a need to explore their experiences in depth and multidimensionally.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Holistic Wellness Model

Our study is guided by the holistic wellness model developed by Chandler et al. (1992), who described six dimensions of wellness: intellectual, physical, spiritual, occupational, social, and emotional. All six are interrelated and together impact an individual's general wellness. Struggles in one dimension create an imbalance that negatively shapes all others and one's overall wellness.

Intellectual wellness centers on creative mental activities such as learning and problem solving, which for graduate students relates to academic achievement and success. Physical wellness addresses self-care, including regular exercise and a healthy diet. Spiritual wellness focuses on finding meaning in life. Occupational

wellness explores how work contributes to personal satisfaction and enrichment. For graduate students, occupational wellness is related to graduate assistantships and career development. Social wellness addresses relationships with others and society. Lastly, emotional wellness, the focus of this study, includes awareness and acceptance of one's feelings and the capacity to deal with them in healthy ways (Meyers & Sweeney, 2008). Literature (Koo, 2021a; 2021b; Park & Millora, 2010) employing the holistic wellness model to conceptualize the relationships between participants' mental wellness and other areas of wellness uses the terms "mental" or "psychological" wellness adapted from emotional wellness. While these terms may be used interchangeably, we use mental wellness (Hermon & Hazier, 1999; Koo, 2021a; 2021b) because this term is what our Korean international participants addressed as they shared their experiences. The holistic wellness model prompted us to explore relationships between different realms of wellness and mental wellness. Figure 1 illustrates the holistic wellness model applied to this study.

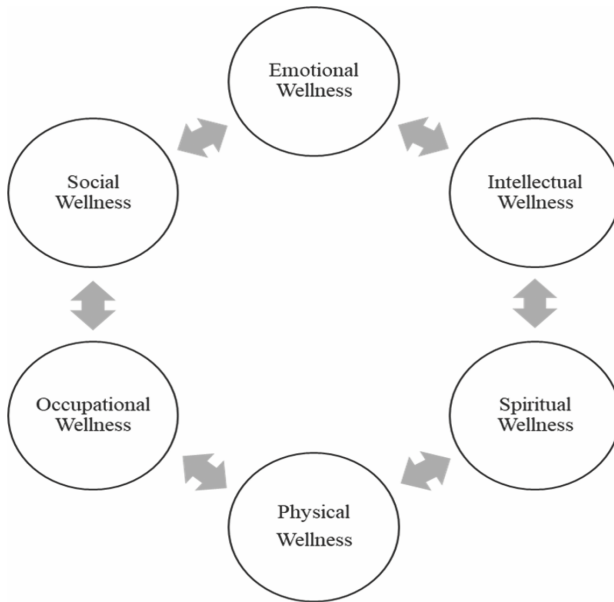


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of the Present Study based on Holistic Wellness Model

METHOD

We used a basic qualitative approach (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Payne, 2017) given the exploratory nature of our inquiry. Basic qualitative studies seek to “discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and

worldviews of the people of the world involved” (Merriam, 1998, p. 11). Basic qualitative research is derived philosophically from symbolic interactions and constructionism and designed for qualitative inquiries investigating how individuals interpret and make meaning from their experiences, and how they construct their surrounding worlds (Merriam, 2009). We explored Korean international graduate students’ perspectives on their mental wellness while studying at U.S. graduate schools, and how they interpret and make meaning from their experiences as students living and studying in a foreign country.

Procedure and Participants

Upon receiving Institutional Review Board approval from the first author’s institution, we recruited participants via social media (e.g., Facebook, Kakaotalk) through purposeful sampling and snowball sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015). We posted a recruitment invitation to a Korean graduate student organization’s Facebook page in May 2018; once recruited, participants recruited others. Eligible participants were Korean international graduate students enrolled in graduate degree programs at large U.S. research universities on temporary student visas (e.g., F-1). Our final sample included 15 Korean international doctoral students (nine males, six females) who studied at institutions in the Southwest region of the United States, representing 10 different majors. Table 1 displays participants’ pseudonyms and demographic information.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Major
Beomseok	Male	28	Business
Bomi	Female	32	Music
Byungwoo	Male	30	Business
DaeHwan	Male	42	Counseling
Junghee	Female	29	Biology
Jungsook	Male	31	Computer science
Kitae	Male	31	Civil engineering/ geotechnical engineering
Kiwoong ^a	Male	31	Sport psychology
Eunjoo	Female	36	Theology
Miji	Female	32	Educational psychology (quant method)
Minkyu	Male	30	Civil engineer/ transportation
Soyoung	Female	29	Cell and molecular biology/ developmental biology
Sunghye	Female	38	Education
WonKi	Male	31	Education
Youngho	Male	32	Sport psychology

^a All participants were from the Southwest, with the exception of Kiwoong, who was from the Southeast.

Data Collection

We conducted semistructured 1–2-hr individual interviews online via Google Hangouts or in person at participants' preferred locations. Interviews were conducted in Korean to avoid language barriers that might limit our ability to capture in-depth experiences (van Nes et al., 2010). Participants received a \$10 Starbucks gift card for participating. They were asked to complete a brief demographic survey before beginning the interview. Following this, the interviewers (the first three authors) asked about their well-being, touching on all areas of Chandler et al.'s (1992) model. Appendix Table A1 displays specific questions. With participants' permission, interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed by the interviewers. The interviewers also reflected on completed interviews in brief field notes.

Data Analysis

We employed a constant comparison method of data analysis (Boeije, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to code and analyze transcripts and field notes. While this is not a grounded theory-based study, we utilized a derivation of the constant comparative analytic method by adapting constant comparison strategies demonstrated in another study (Park et al., 2017).

We analyzed the data by comparing each interpretation and finding with existing findings when themes emerged (Boeije, 2002; Park et al., 2017). In an initial round of coding, each researcher highlighted keywords or phrases that addressed well-being and related experiences (Park et al., 2017). Concepts that emerged consistently were grouped under categories. We then shared categories and developed a set of emerging findings. We compared these to additional data, further refining our categories. Next, the first author reviewed all interview transcripts again, comparing the categories to our theoretical framework to develop broader themes. The fourth author, brought in later in the process, then reviewed these themes, focusing on connections to mental wellness. The first and fourth authors then teased out how participants' experiences were related to their mental wellness within each theme.

Interviews were transcribed in Korean to accurately capture emotional and cultural nuances; Korean transcripts were used for the initial data analysis. The first author translated direct quotes included here from Korean to English. The second and third authors double-checked those translations for accuracy. The first three authors were born and raised in Korea. Korean is their first language, while they also speak English at a professional level. In addition, to ensure the authenticity and accuracy of the translations of direct quotes, the first three authors constantly compared the Korean transcriptions and English translations. Lastly, a bilingual peer debriefing member reviewed all Korean and English translated quotations.

Trustworthiness

To strengthen trustworthiness, we engaged in member checking by sharing drafts of our analysis with participants and asking for feedback. In addition, we used researcher triangulation by analyzing data individually first, then coming together to compare emerging themes (Carter et al., 2014). We also engaged in reflective memoing through the data collection and analysis, used peer review with other scholars, and created an audit trail detailing each step (Truong et al., 2016). Next, we share our positionality as researchers to provide insights into how our backgrounds and experiences may have shaped the research design and data interpretation.

Researcher Positionality

All four authors are currently or have previously been international graduate students. The first three, an assistant professor in an education program and two doctoral students in education, identify as Korean. The fourth, a clinical assistant professor in higher education and student affairs, is an Austrian national. The first three, whose first language is Korean, conducted all interviews. Sharing the same cultural background and similar experiences allowed them to quickly build rapport with participants. The fourth author joined the team during data analysis and writing, bringing a unique perspective due to understanding the experiences of international students in the United States but knowing little of Korean culture.

RESULTS

We found four key themes regarding the intellectual, social, and occupational wellness of Korean international graduate students that seemed to relate to their mental wellness.

Limited English Proficiency Leads to Frustration and Negatively Impacts Well-Being

All participants reported that limited English proficiency negatively impacted their intellectual wellness, mental wellness, and other aspects of wellness, including social, occupational, and physical wellness.

For example, Jungsook, a 31-year-old male doctoral student in computer science, linked his limited English skills to mental well-being and other aspects of wellness: “English ruined everything about my ability, emotional health, and even physical health because I could not get good-quality sleep because of this anger related to my English skills.” Jungsook shared that his English skills impacted his ability, which may indicate a relationship with his academic achievement and career development, as well as his mental wellness, and even physical wellness. For students like Jungsook, English proficiency seems to be the main hurdle hindering success and happiness.

Several students, such as Bomi, a 31-year-old female doctoral student in music, linked limited English proficiency to challenges with faculty and advisors:

“When I visited my advisor’s office...I automatically felt frustrated. The look on her face that she did not understand me properly. When she asked me the question again, I made even more mistakes.” Bomi worried that faculty questioned her competence, connecting her English proficiency to her academic achievement. In addition, she expressed frustration with her inability to communicate effectively, suggesting that these struggles are impacting her mental wellness.

Eunjoo, a 36-year-old female doctoral student in theology who had lived in the United States for 13 years, also shared concerns about how others, particularly her advisor, viewed her:

I know it’s been 13 years....But...my past 9 years were useless—raising three children and doing house chores....Most people that I interact with as a mother...only speak Korean. It is so embarrassing when my advisor still doesn’t trust my conference presentations.

Eunjoo worried that her advisor questioned her competence due to her lack of English skills, which indicates that her limited English may be impacting her intellectual and mental wellness. Eunjoo’s comments highlight that length of U.S. residence alone does not resolve language barriers.

Some participants, like WonKi, a 34-year-old male doctoral student in educational psychology, indicated that limited English skills impacted their relationships with peers:

I felt left out in the class because my poor English was obvious. Even though I prepared a lot: maybe I read more than any other students in the room. But my opinions were not respected...due to my limited English.

Participants like WonKi believed that peers dismissed their opinions due to their limited English proficiency, which indicates concerns related to academic achievement. WonKi’s statement that he felt left out shows that limited English proficiency may also lead to social isolation, which could negatively impact social and mental wellness.

Self-Imposed Academic and Career Pressures Negatively Impact Mental Wellness

Most participants pressured themselves to do well in academia and their careers. Negative feedback from faculty and uncertainty about future careers created significant stress. Many shared concerns about what their parents might think if they were not as successful as expected. Thus, academic and occupational wellness affect Korean students’ mental wellness.

Byung-woo, a 30-year-old male student in a business doctoral program, shared, “I feel depressed now....there’s no way back when I fail....I doubt even the possibility of degree completion....I constantly receive bad feedback, I mean the worst feedback from professors.” Byung-woo felt pressure to succeed; not completing the program was not an option. Thus, negative feedback led to stress and worry, which negatively affected his mental wellness.

While Byung-woo worried primarily about completing his degree, students like WonKi were concerned about postcollege careers: “Apparently, coming to America to pursue graduate degrees is all about uncertainty. This lingering question was always on my mind: Can I succeed eventually? Can I get a job after completing this doctoral degree?”

Bomi also described how occupational wellness impacted her mental wellness:

I am so depressed and sad most of the time...I have played the flute since I was 10. All of the expensive lessons and expensive performances my parents invested in. I feel so much pressure to succeed in my career.

Bomi’s worries were increased because of the time and money she and her parents had invested in her career path. Such self-imposed pressure to not disappoint parents who have sacrificed was common.

Self-Blaming and Perceived Inability Related to Academic Success Leads to Further Deterioration of Mental Wellness

Participants often blamed themselves for their struggles, which further hurt their mental wellness. In addition, participants did not know how to express what they felt, which led to increased loneliness and further deterioration. Negative perceptions of their academic and professional accomplishments let them self-blame, which eventually impacted their mental wellness.

For example, Jungsook blamed himself for difficulty communicating: “I would automatically criticize myself for not being able to speak English well enough to stand up for myself in America. Who should I blame? It’s my English.” Participants like Jungsook did not expect others to change their behaviors to accommodate them, such as adjusting their speed when talking or finding ways around language barriers, but saw it as their responsibility to overcome language challenges. Rather than questioning whether faculty or peers could be more supportive, Jungsook believed that he should have known better.

DaeHwan, a 42-year-old male student in a counseling doctoral program, blamed himself for not being adequately prepared: “I cannot follow the speed of my advisor or my lab peers. It’s just me being unprepared. I should have studied harder when I was an undergraduate.” DaeHwan took all the blame for his challenges and even worried about his advisor being impacted by his lack of academic preparation. Such self-blaming further decreases students’ mental wellness.

Struggles with expressing feelings also harmed participants’ well-being. Many explained that they did not know how to express their feelings, did not see the value in doing so, or had not succeeded in expressing them in the past. Jungsook explained why he did not share his struggles with others: “I think that’s because I don’t even know my mental wellness....Because I never learned how to express that. I am just used to pretending I am ok. If I reveal my emotion, then it’s very weak and shameful.” Jungsook didn’t seem to have a reference point for what would be considered concerning symptoms of a lack of mental wellness. He

also indicated that he never learned how to put his feelings into words and saw expressing his feeling as shameful. Thus, he saw no benefit in talking about his feelings or his lack of mental wellness.

Others, like Leah, tried unsuccessfully to share their thoughts with others:

If that would lead to more positive consequences. I would explain my feelings and ask for help. But from those multiple trials in the past, I gradually learned that honest sharing of my feelings will rather harm me. Since then, I just shut my mouth.

Leah seemed to have tried to share her feelings, but because her attempts did not go well, she decided to stop. Overall, when participants experienced challenges and were not doing well mentally, they seemed to engage in self-blaming or to keep those feelings to themselves; both further harmed their mental wellness, leaving them with no support.

Spiritual, Social, and Physical Wellness Improve Mental Wellness

One way participants tried to deal with challenges was by getting involved in religious and spiritual activities or starting to work out regularly. These activities provided social support, allowed time to reflect, and provided an outlet for stress and negative feelings.

More than half of the participants reported engaging in religious or spiritual activities to overcome challenges or negative feelings, even though many had not considered themselves religious or spiritual back home. Eunjoo shared:

Being involved with religiosity and spirituality played an important role in my overall study abroad experiences. I was not very religious back in Korea, but I became a very active member in my church and campus Christian organization and it changed my perspective. I was able to stay connected to fellow students in that organization. It helped me overcome the lowest point of my life in here.

Religion had not been a big part of Eunjoo's life in Korea, maybe because she had not needed additional support. However, as she encountered challenges adjusting to life in the United States, finding a community through campus Christian organizations and a church that provided support helped improve her mental wellness.

Others, like WonKi, relied on religious belief to help make sense of their experiences in the United States:

I know there must be a reason that God sent me here to have these diverse experiences, both positive and negative. This whole process was a meaning-making journey because I grew and I gradually found the meaning of these difficult times.

For WonKi, spirituality was not only about finding social support but also about making sense of difficulties. Believing there was a purpose to his challenges allowed him to see his experiences more positively, improving his mental wellness.

Others turned to physical activity to improve their mental wellness. Many had not prioritized working out back home but found it an important strategy to deal with challenges in the United States. Leah shared:

My quality of life was divided into before exercise and after exercise. I went to the gym and received 10 personal training sessions. I gained so much energy and power in my body and my mind. My mood was much better after exercise and it affected my emotional health overall.

Exercising offered Eunjoo a healthy way to deal with stress and illness. She noted how, as her body started feeling better, her mental wellness also improved. Others stressed that physical exercise also provided time to reflect, like Youngho, a 32-year-old male doctoral student in sport pedagogy:

I consider regular exercise a major contributor to my positive academic performance, mental health, and general well-being. When I exercise, I kind of meditate, focus on myself, reflect on what I did, and make plans and organize my mind again. This ritual positively impacted my academic growth.

Youngho connected physical exercise with physical, mental, and intellectual wellness. Overall, participants found religious activities or engaging in physical activities beneficial to many aspects of wellness, including mental wellness.

DISCUSSION

Our analysis helped us gain a better understanding of experiences that shaped Korean international graduate students' mental wellness. Overall, our findings support the use of Chandler and colleagues' (1992) holistic wellness model, which highlights various aspects of wellness and their interconnections. We found, for example, that physical wellness could positively influence emotional wellness, as participants used physical activity to help improve their mental wellness. Similarly, challenges in their academic and career development, which fall under intellectual and occupational wellness, negatively influenced their emotional wellness. Thus, when striving to support Korean international graduate students, it is essential to consider all aspects of wellness.

Our study supports previous findings indicating that language barriers can negatively influence mental health (e.g., Liu, 2009; Luo et al., 2019; Mori, 2000). Our participants highlighted how limited English proficiency influenced many aspects of wellness—from academic or intellectual wellness to occupational, social, and even physical wellness. Notably, challenges with English proficiency were not necessarily resolved by longer residence in the United States. This indicates that language barriers can create long-term challenges without appropriate support.

Importantly, our findings on Korean students' English proficiency challenges do not significantly differ from other studies on international students' experiences. However, we found that Korean students particularly struggle with their English, and that this struggle relates to other aspects of wellness (e.g., social, academic, and occupational wellness), while other nonnative English-speaking international students (e.g., Chinese, Indian, or Mexican international students) feel less stressed about proficiency (Li et al., 2016; Martirosyan et al., 2015; Smiljanic, 2017). We interpreted the greater stress of Korean students as a result from English being more challenging for them due to linguistic differences between Korean and English (e.g., linguistic system, pronunciation). For example, whereas Korean students struggle to master English, students from China or Mexico adapt to English-speaking environments well because Chinese and Spanish are linguistically more similar to English (Gray, 2000; He, 1996; Wahyudi, 2016). In addition, we noted that cultural adjustment and acculturative stress are more problematic for Korean students than other international students because Koreans are more likely to maintain their heritage culture and are greatly proud of their cultural background, rooted in Korea's unique homogenous monoculture (Choi et al., 2009; J. S. Lee & Shin, 2008; Song, 2012). This may affect Korean international students' adaptation and acculturation process more negatively compared with other international students.

Regarding Korean students' struggles with English and their mental wellness and related experiences, we interpret their challenges not as weakness, vulnerability, or cultural awkwardness, but as caused by current U.S. systems, dominant political power, and U.S.-centric culture (Jean-Francois, 2019; J. Lee et al., 2019; Yao et al., 2019; J. Yoon & Koo, 2019), which influence Korean students to perceive themselves as inferior and to struggle more due to their marginalized status. For example, the English language is used as a global, dominant language and is used to oppress students who are not native English speakers (Karuppan & Barari, 2010; Koo, Baker et al., 2021; J. Lee et al., 2019). Therefore, these challenges not about Korean students' "faults," but rather the U.S. culture that is not welcoming. For example, is it limited English proficiency that is the problem? Or the campus climate that is not supportive of students with limited English proficiency (J. Lee et al., 2019)? Our participants showed that they blame themselves for something that is a problem of campus climate or dominant political pressure. Because of Korean students' marginalized status due to language, culture, legal status, etc., they are put in positions where they struggle and endure mental wellness problems. But, our interpretation is that the U.S.-centric campus climate (Jean-Francois, 2019; Koo, Tan, & Lee, 2021; Lee & Rice, 2007) affects international students' experiences in ways that jeopardize their mental wellness. Therefore, current educators, student affairs professionals, and faculty who work with Korean international students should understand the marginalized positions that derive from the system and culture so that they can cultivate a supportive environment for international students.

Our study adds to the literature on international graduate student mental wellness by highlighting experiences unique to Korean international graduate students. Similar to previous findings that they hesitate to participate in whole-

class discussions (J. Kim, 2013; G. Lee, 2009; J. Yoon et al., 2020), our participants struggled to speak up in classes. They indicated that their hesitancy was due to not feeling that their comments were valued because of their limited English proficiency; our study adds to the literature by linking these challenges to mental wellness.

Several other themes also seem to be shaped by Korean culture. For example, many participants pressured themselves to succeed, seeing failure as “shameful.” Much of that pressure and associated shame seemed due to worrying about not living up to parents’ academic and career expectations, a well-documented aspect of Korean culture (e.g., Ahn & Baek, 2012; C. Kim & Dembo, 2000; Z. N. Lee, 1999). When facing setbacks or challenges, participants were quick to blame themselves for not studying hard enough or choosing the wrong major, a theme connected to shame and guilt in Korean culture (Z. N. Lee, 1999). Considering how these aspects of Korean culture shape Korean international graduate students’ wellness highlights the importance of considering specific cultures when exploring mental wellness.

Limitations

We recognize limitations of our study. First, the findings represent Korean international students from a single geographical region (i.e., Southwest region) of the United States, which limits generalizability to Korean students studying at higher education institutions in other regions of the United States. Therefore, more systematic investigation comparing experiences across different regions will provide insight into how institutions’ geographic locations impact international students’ experiences. Second, our findings are limited to students’ perceptions and experiences during one part of their academic journey. Changes in and development of students’ experiences are not captured in our study; longitudinal research tracing changes with multiwave time points would provide insights into students’ development. Third, although we presented information on the unique cultural background shaping Korean students’ wellness and related experiences, some of our findings are not very different from those regarding other Asian international students. Thus, our study indicates a need to continue to further explore experiences of specific cultural groups, including Korean students. Much current literature on international student mental wellness examines international students as one group or splits them into large groups incorporating several different cultural or ethnic groups (e.g., Asian international students). Our study highlights how unique cultural aspects shape mental wellness; thus, more research focusing on subgroups is needed. While this study added to our understanding of Korean international students, further studies are needed to gain more insights into their graduate school experiences related to mental wellness.

Practical Implications

Our study provides several insights for supporting Korean international graduate students' overall wellness. First, participants indicated that physical activity and involvement in religious organizations positively influenced their wellness. Previous research has highlighted the benefits of physical activity for mental health and quality of life (Broekhuizen et al., 2016) and religiosity as a stress coping skill (Chai et al., 2012). Practitioners may thus consider exploring these strategies—physical activity and religion or spirituality—to improve these students' mental health and overall wellness.

Second, the role limited English proficiency played indicates a need to support Korean international graduate students to improve their English language skills. In addition, it is critical not to blame their limited English proficiency, but to understand that English is the language of global domination, and is used to discriminate against nonnative English speakers (Karuppan & Barari, 2010). Further, it is strongly recommended that faculty, student affairs professionals, and policy makers understand that U.S.-centric culture affects Korean students' experiences in ways that jeopardize their mental wellness due to their marginalized status. Therefore, it is critical to provide in-depth educational sessions for professionals so that more culturally sensitive (Koo & Nyunt, 2020) and competent services can be provided.

Third, our study indicates that practitioners working with Korean international graduate students should consider unique aspects of Korean culture when developing programming or interventions. Participants' uncertainty and hesitancy about expressing their feelings, for example, may explain the underutilization of counseling services by Korean and other Asian international students (E. Yoon & Jepsen, 2008). Faculty, advisors, and student affairs staff should try to develop culturally sensitive ways of encouraging these students to seek mental health services. In addition, faculty and advisors should explore ways to support students who put excessive pressure on themselves to succeed academically, as this was a major concern. Most importantly though, practitioners should try to learn more about international graduate students' cultures to better support them through challenging situations.

CONCLUSION

As U.S. college campuses diversify their student populations, it is critical to understand and support diverse student groups, particularly marginalized groups that receive less attention and care. Korean international graduate students experience unique challenges and mental health issues and need genuine support and in-depth understanding from their U.S. advisors, faculty, and staff. This study sheds light on Korean international graduate students' mental wellness and related experiences. We hope that it provides insights and guidelines for researchers and practitioners to understand and support this special population.

NOTE

Appendices for this article can be found on the JIS website: <https://www.ojed.org/index.php/jis>.

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