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The Effects of English Proficiency and Social Support on the Self-Esteem of South Korean International College Students with Early Study Abroad Experience: The Mediating Role of Acculturative Stress

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how English proficiency, social support, and acculturative stress influence the self-esteem of 241 Korean international college students with early study abroad experience who continue their education at institutions in the U.S. and Canada. Social support had a significant positive direct effect on self-esteem. English proficiency and social support were negatively associated with acculturative stress, resulting in higher levels of self-esteem. Despite early study abroad, acculturative stress remains a key factor affecting self-esteem. The results suggest that professionals working with international students should not only focus on providing resources to enhance English language learning but also offer various forms of social support to foster a sense of belonging, ultimately facilitating a successful adjustment to the host culture. Further implications are discussed.

Keywords: Early study abroad, English proficiency, social support, acculturative stress, self-esteem

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Statistics from the Korean Educational Development Institute (2023) indicate that approximately 8,000–30,000 South Korean elementary, middle, and high school students have been counted as studying abroad every year since 2001, although the number has declined significantly since the COVID-19 outbreak. Early study abroad (ESA) is defined as attending elementary, middle, or high school in a foreign country and living in that country for more than a year (Kim, 2015). Changes in policies that allow studying abroad from elementary school, dissatisfaction with public education, and the need for English fluency in the era of globalization are among the important factors that have promoted the ESA in South Korea (Park & Jang, 2020). A number of students with ESA experience continue their higher education in foreign countries. According to a study that targeted parents who were preparing for children's ESAs, the percentage of parents who hoped their children would continue their higher education in foreign countries after the ESA was approximately six times greater than that of parents who hoped for children's higher education to continue in South Korea (Lee et al., 2007).

Studying abroad can help international students achieve their personal, educational, or career goals, but it may also present challenges and difficulties. Specifically, studies focusing on ESAs have reported potential vulnerabilities among students with ESA experience, including emotional problems, maladjustment in schools, and a lack of parental monitoring and support, particularly among students who are currently undergoing ESAs (Cho, 2011; Kim & Okazaki, 2014). However, only a few studies have examined the adjustment of college students who have experienced ESAs. This could be due to the common belief that a longer stay in a foreign country automatically leads to better adjustment. Nevertheless, Korean international college students with ESA experience report several psychological adjustment issues, such as cultural identity confusion, depression, and low self-esteem (Jung & Han, 2010; Kim, 2015). For example, qualitative studies conducted on Korean international college students with ESA experience indicate that they do not have a perfect sense of belonging in either their home culture or the host culture, resulting in cultural identity confusion (Kim, 2015; Lee, 2010). Furthermore, a previous finding revealed that the longer the stay in the United States is, the greater the level of depression among young Korean international students (Lee, 2009a). Given the prevalence of ESAs in South Korea and the importance of childhood experiences that may affect individuals' development from the life-course perspective

(Goldman-Mellor et al., 2012), there is a need to focus on the adjustment of international college students with ESA experience.

Specifically, since positive self-esteem plays a vital role in maintaining psychological health and achieving successful adjustment in young adulthood (Arsandaux et al., 2021), it is particularly important to draw attention to the self-esteem of international college students who have experienced ESA. Although international students frequently experience low self-esteem (Jung & Han, 2010; Wei et al., 2008), very few studies have explored individual and contextual elements that may contribute to their self-esteem (Lopez & Bui, 2014). Specifically, English proficiency (Pak et al., 1985; Tsai et al., 2001), social support (Bum & Jeon, 2016; Shim & Kim, 2022), and acculturative stress (Claudat et al., 2015; Lee & Qin, 2011) may affect international students' self-esteem. However, no study has explored the possible structural relationships among these elements among Korean international college students with ESA experience and their self-esteem.

Additionally, despite reports on the vulnerability of Korean students with ESAs in terms of psychological adjustment (Kim, 2015; Lee, 2010; Park, 2013), most previous studies have focused either on these students' acculturation process, adaptability, and experiences when they return to their home country or on how language proficiency or how cultural identity affects their mental health individually (Lee, 2019). This study aims to bridge this research gap by examining the relationships among English proficiency, social support, and acculturative stress, which may contribute to the self-esteem of Korean international college students with ESA experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-Esteem

Since the mid-1960s, researchers have continuously discussed self-esteem as one facet of individuals' self-development. Self-esteem is defined as the ability to evaluate oneself as competent and valuable through subjective judgment (Rosenberg, 1979) and a "belief about one's worth" (Bosson & Swann, 2009, p. 530). Numerous studies have revealed that individuals may exhibit various outcomes on the basis of their self-esteem. For example, individuals with low self-esteem often struggle to build and maintain positive interpersonal relationships, as social acceptance frequently presents a challenge for them (Baldwin et al., 2004). In addition, people with low self-esteem are more likely to have poor psychological adjustment after stressful situations than are those with high self-esteem. This is because they do not have positive feelings of self-worth, which protects them from the adverse consequences of negative experiences, such as failure or rejection (DeHart et al., 2013). Moreover, individuals with high self-esteem are not only more resilient than those with low self-esteem when faced with unfavorable social criticism but also less susceptible to negative events and recover from such experiences more quickly (Brown, 2010; Zeigler-Hill, 2013).

English Proficiency and Self-Esteem

Numerous studies have revealed a significant relationship between English proficiency and self-esteem. While studies illustrating a positive relationship between English proficiency and self-esteem have focused primarily on Chinese populations (Pak et al., 1985; Tsai et al., 2001), few studies have focused on international student samples. A study of international college students from various ethnicities in the United States, for example, showed that confidence in the English language predicted self-esteem (Lopez, 2011). Similarly, research on Asian-born international students in Australia reported that students' English proficiency was significantly associated with their self-esteem (Mak et al., 2015).

However, the relationship between English proficiency and self-esteem has not yet been investigated among Korean international students, considering that their years spent living in the host country or ESA experience may have impacted their English proficiency. These students also display unique characteristics in that they have low self-confidence in their language skills, expressing uncertainty in both Korean and English despite spending a significant amount of time learning English in the host country (Lee, 2010). In addition, they tend to underestimate their English skills, which may be influenced by their cultural background (Lee, 2009).

Social Support and Self-Esteem

Social support involves "providing assistance or comfort to others, typically to help them cope with various biological, psychological, and social stressors" (American Psychological Association, 2007). A number of studies have illustrated how important social support from family, friends, and significant others is for young adults, including college students from diverse backgrounds (Alsubaie et al., 2019; Ye et al., 2022). Social support is not only essential for positive well-being in and of itself but also serves as a valuable coping resource for those experiencing difficult life changes, such as cultural transitions (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). For example, previous research has shown that Korean international students who experienced acculturative stress but perceived a high level of social support reported fewer mental health symptoms than those who perceived a low level of social support (Lee et al., 2004). Similarly, a qualitative study of Korean adolescents studying abroad alone also indicated that the support of the host family and parental support substantially helped these students adapt to the host country (Kang et al., 2010).

Several previous studies have investigated the relationship between social support and self-esteem among college students from various countries (Asif, 2019; Goodwin et al., 2004). For example, studies that targeted Korean college students have generally reported a positive relationship between these two factors (Bum & Jeon, 2016; Shim & Kim, 2022). Research has also indicated that self-esteem is increased when individuals communicate that they are appreciated for their own worth and experiences and that they are acknowledged despite any personal imperfections (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Therefore, perceived social support is predicted to have a significant influence on individuals' self-esteem, and it is crucial to understand the process by which social support enhances the self-esteem of international students. However, few studies have examined the relationship between the social support and self-esteem of international students, and the results are inconsistent. For example, perceived social support has a positive effect on the self-esteem of Chinese international college students in Korea, which in turn has a positive influence on their subjective well-being (Jin & Jin, 2021). However, a study conducted among international college students in the United States revealed no significant relationship between social support and self-esteem; neither social support from one's linguistic group nor support from the English-speaking community significantly predicted these students' self-esteem (Lopez, 2011).

Acculturative Stress and Self-Esteem

According to Berry et al. (1987), acculturative stress can be defined as a reduction in physical, psychological, and social health associated with the acculturation process. Acculturative stress often occurs when individuals struggle to adjust to a new environment, as this involves changes in cultural values, behaviors, social norms, food, and languages (Claudat, White, & Warren, 2015). Many international students face acculturative stress while studying abroad (Poyrazli et al., 2010). Moreover, international college students from South Asian countries and East Asian countries in the United States experienced greater levels of acculturative stress than did international students from Europe (Yeh & Inose, 2003).

Several studies have demonstrated a negative relationship between acculturative stress and self-esteem in immigrant or second-generation samples (Claudat et al., 2015; Lee & Qin, 2011). These studies suggest that for individuals who leave their homeland, acculturative stress may significantly influence their self-appraisals. Nonetheless, very few studies have explored the relationship between acculturative stress and self-esteem among international students. In one study, acculturative stress was significantly negatively correlated with the self-esteem of young Korean international students in the United States (Lee, 2009b). Furthermore, Korean international college students had significantly lower levels of self-esteem than Caucasian American college students did. The difference was attributed to the acculturative stress that Korean international students encountered (Jung & Han, 2010). Regardless of the time spent in the host country, international students with ESA experience may still face acculturative stress. Several qualitative studies on Korean international students with ESA experience revealed that, despite spending extended periods in the host country, these students felt a lack of belonging to both the host country and their home country, resulting in cultural identity confusion (Kim, 2015; Lee, 2010). A study of young Korean international students also revealed that those who commenced their studies abroad at an early age encountered challenges in comprehending and adjusting to American culture because of their continued dependence on and strong attachment to Korean cultural values (Park, 2013). However, very few

studies have examined whether the acculturative stress of international students who have ESA experience predicts their self-esteem.

The Mediating Effect of Acculturative Stress on English Proficiency and Self-Esteem

One of the challenges that many international students encounter is the language barrier since the ability to use a new country's language proficiently is essential in adjusting to life in that country (Duru & Poyrazli, 2007). Specifically, previous research has shown that even after spending significant time at the study abroad destination and regardless of how long they have resided in the host country, Korean international students with ESA experience consistently reported a lack of confidence in their language proficiency (Lee, 2010).

In terms of the importance of English proficiency in the acculturation process, scholars have generally reported a negative relationship between English proficiency and acculturative stress among international students of different ethnicities. For example, except one study that reported no significant relationship between English proficiency and acculturative stress (Bai, 2016), many studies have repeatedly shown that English proficiency contributes to the variation in international students' acculturative stress and that students with greater levels of English proficiency experience lower levels of acculturative stress (Koo et al., 2021; Su et al., 2021). In addition, lower levels of acculturative stress among international students were predicted by a higher frequency of English usage, fluency level, and the degree to which individuals felt comfortable speaking English (Yeh & Inose, 2003).

While no research has explored the mediating role of acculturative stress in the relationship between English proficiency and self-esteem, few studies have examined the relationships among English proficiency, acculturative stress, and international students' adjustment (Lee, 2009a; Zeigler-Hill, 2013). For example, a study of international graduate students in the United States reported a negative correlation between English proficiency and acculturative stress, whereas a positive correlation was detected between depressive symptoms and acculturative stress among these students (Smiljanic, 2017). Furthermore, studies have reported a significant relationship between English proficiency and acculturative stress (Duru & Poyrazli, 2007; Koo et al., 2021; Su et al., 2021), as well as between acculturative stress and self-esteem (Claudat et al., 2015; Lee & Qin, 2011). Therefore, acculturative stress can be expected to mediate the effects of English proficiency on international college students' self-esteem.

The Mediating Effect of Acculturative Stress on Social Support and Self-Esteem

Social support is a significant and effective personal resource that can alleviate acculturative stress (Kristiana et al., 2022). For example, Chinese international students in Korea who received less support from their professors, fellow Chinese friends, and family members experienced higher levels of

acculturative stress than those who received such support (Lee, 2011). In addition, several studies have shown that specific sources of social support can help lower acculturative stress. For example, among Korean international students, support from new friends in the United States was significantly and negatively associated with acculturative stress (Ra, 2016). Moreover, school support significantly predicts acculturative stress among international students in the United States (Bai, 2016).

Although no study has investigated whether acculturative stress mediates the relationship between social support and self-esteem among Korean international college students, several studies have demonstrated significant relationships among social support, acculturative stress, and the adjustment of international students. For example, research targeting international college students enrolled in U.S. universities has indicated that social support is significantly negatively correlated with students' acculturative stress and that acculturative stress is significantly negatively correlated with students' self-esteem (Jackson et al., 2013). Furthermore, acculturative stress can be expected to mediate the effect of social support on self-esteem, as previous studies reported significant relationships between social support and acculturative stress (Koo et al., 2021; Ra, 2016) and between acculturative stress and self-esteem (Claudat et al., 2015; Jung & Han, 2010).

Current Study

Despite the growing number of studies focusing on the study abroad experiences of Asian international students, very few studies have specifically targeted Korean international college students. In addition, few studies have investigated the adaptation of young adults who began their studies during childhood or adolescence and pursued higher education abroad. Hence, this study examined the effects of English proficiency, social support, and acculturative stress on the self-esteem of Korean international college students with ESA experience. The following hypotheses were proposed:

- H₁: Both English proficiency and social support have positive direct effects on the self-esteem of Korean international college students with ESA experience.
- H₂: Both English proficiency and social support have positive indirect effects on the self-esteem of Korean international college students with ESA experience through acculturative stress.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

The participants included 241 Korean international college students who experienced ESAs in North America (the United States and Canada). The data

were collected via an online survey. The survey's web URL, as well as flyers describing the study, were posted on four online platforms where Korean international college students could access them (e.g., online bulletin boards via Korean student association websites, online community websites for Korean immigrants or international students). In addition, some participants were invited to complete the survey through snowball sampling. The survey was conducted from January to February 2023. All survey questions and instructions were administered in both English and Korean. Before the survey was conducted, the researcher clearly outlined the study's purpose and provided guidelines for completing the questionnaires. These included participation procedures, potential risks or discomfort, and protocols for early withdrawal or discontinuation. Only individuals who clicked the "agree" button after reading the research statement were eligible to participate in the study.

Among the 241 study participants, 199 were female (82.6%), and 42 were male (17.4%). The mean age of the sample was 22.7 years ($SD = 2.04$). Thirty-one respondents (12.9%) were enrolled in their 1st year at university, 90 (37.3%) were in their 2nd year, 65 (27.0%) were in their 3rd year, and 55 (22.8%) were in their 4th year at university. A total of 162 (67.2%) participants lived in the United States, whereas 79 (32.8%) lived in Canada. The participants' mean age at the start of their study abroad experience was 15.9 years ($SD = 2.65$), and the average total duration of their study abroad was approximately 7 years ($SD = 33.12$). Approximately 22.0% of the participants ($n = 53$) were studying abroad alone, whereas 78.0% ($n = 188$) were living with family members.

Measures

English Proficiency

The participants were asked to rate their level of English proficiency on the basis of 4 items that assessed different areas of English proficiency. Mak's (2009) 4-item measure of English proficiency was used to assess participants' proficiency in writing, reading, speaking, and comprehension in English on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (very limited) to 6 (extremely well). The Korean version of this scale was translated by the researcher and administered along with the original version of the scale. The total score of this measurement is the sum of 4 items, with higher scores signifying higher levels of English proficiency. The Cronbach's alpha was .67.

Perceived Social Support

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988) was used to assess the participants' perceived social support. For the Korean version of this scale, the present study modified and used a scale that was translated into Korean and validated by Shin and Lee (1999). The MSPSS consists of 12 items that measure perceptions of social support from three specific sources, namely, family, friends, and significant others, with 4 items in each subscale. The

participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with each item on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The total score is the average of all 12 items, with higher scores representing greater perceived social support. The Cronbach's alpha was .87.

Acculturative Stress

Acculturative stress was measured via the Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). The Korean version of this scale translated by Lee (1996) was modified and used in this study. This scale has a total of 36 items that address 7 factors, such as perceived discrimination (8 items), homesickness (4 items), perceived hate (5 items), fear (4 items), stress due to change/culture shock (3 items), guilt (2 items), and miscellaneous/nonspecific (10 items). Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The total score is the sum of all 7 factors, and higher scores on each item indicate greater acculturative stress. The Cronbach's alpha was .96.

Self-Esteem

The participants' self-esteem was assessed via the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965). For the Korean version of this scale, this study modified and used a scale that was translated into Korean and validated by Bae et al. (2014). The RSES is a one-factor scale that consists of 10 items measuring individuals' global self-esteem. The participants were asked to indicate how much they agreed with each item on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The total score of this scale is the sum of all 10 items. The higher the score is, the higher the self-esteem. The Cronbach's alpha was .80.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed via SPSS 26.0 (IBM Co., Armonk, NY) and AMOS 22.0 (IBM Co., Armonk, NY). First, a preliminary analysis was conducted, including descriptive statistics of the data. Cronbach's alpha was calculated to assess the internal consistency of the measurements, and the Pearson correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationships between the study variables. Second, to test the research model, path analysis was performed. Since this model was saturated ($\chi^2 = .000$, $df = 0$; Raykov et al., 2013), model fit indices were not reported, as they are not informative in such cases. Previous studies have indicated that demographic variables such as length of stay in the host country, age, and gender are associated with the current study variables (Lee, 2009a; Lopez & Bui, 2014; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Su et al., 2021; Zhang & Jung, 2017). Hence, the study participants' gender, country of residence, start age of study abroad, duration of study abroad, and year of study were included as covariates.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Before proceeding with the main analysis, the means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis were calculated to assess the overall tendency and normality of the collected data. The skewness and kurtosis values ranged from -1.05-3.46, confirming that all the variables were within acceptable limits, as their absolute values met the normality criteria established by Kline (2015). Linearity and homoscedasticity were assessed via scatterplots, and the variance inflation factor (VIF) values ranged from 1.73-2.12, which was less than 10, indicating that there were no issues with multicollinearity. Statistically significant correlations were found among all the main variables (<Table 1>).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations among the Study Variables (N = 241)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<u>Control variable</u>									
1. Gender	-								
2. Country of residence	-.24**	-							
3. Start age of study abroad	.16*	-.47**	-						
4. Duration of study abroad	-.06	.27**	-.71**	-					
5. Year of study	-.06	.16*	-.05	.43**	-				
6. English proficiency	-.15*	.50**	-.48**	.45**	.36**	-			
7. Social support	-.26**	.62**	-.46**	.37**	.27**	.65**	-		
8. Acculturative stress	.27**	.56**	.39**	-.34**	-.29**	-.69**	-.80**	-	
9. Self-esteem	-.20**	.42**	-.35**	.31**	.28**	.57**	.76**	-.82**	-
<i>M</i>			15.93	83.99	2.60	4.13	4.75	2.81	2.81
<i>SD</i>			2.65	33.12	.98	.86	.97	.75	.55
<i>Range</i>			5-19	2-19	1-4	3-6	3-7	1-4	2-4
Skewness			-1.57	1.54	.05	.55	.51	-.70	.42
Kurtosis			2.78	3.46	-1.05	-.61	-.90	-1.03	-.79

Note. Gender (male = 0, female = 1), country of residence (United States = 0, Canada = 1), start age of study abroad (years), duration of study abroad (years)
 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

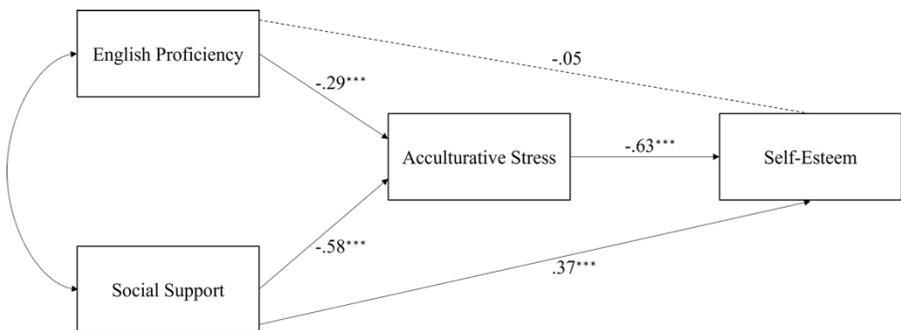
Path analysis

Path analysis was performed to investigate the effects of English proficiency, social support, and acculturative stress on the self-esteem of Korean international college students (<Table 2>, [Figure 1]). When the direct path was examined, English proficiency’s direct effect on self-esteem was insignificant. On the other hand, the direct effect of social support on self-esteem was positively significant ($\beta = .37, p < .001$). When the indirect path was examined, the effect of English proficiency on acculturative stress was found to be negatively significant ($\beta = -.29, p < .001$), as was the effect of acculturative stress on self-esteem ($\beta = -.63, p < .001$). These findings indicate that the greater the level of English proficiency is, the lower the level of acculturative stress, resulting in a higher level of self-esteem among Korean international college students. Moreover, the effect of social support on acculturative stress was negatively significant ($\beta = -.58, p < .001$), and the effect of acculturative stress on self-esteem appeared to be negatively significant ($\beta = -.63, p < .001$). According to this finding, the more social support students perceive, the less acculturative stress they experience, resulting in greater self-esteem among Korean international college students.

Table 2: Standardized and unstandardized loadings for the mediational model (N = 241)

Path loadings	B	β	S.E.	C.R.
English Proficiency → Acculturative Stress	-.25	-.29	.04	-5.77***
Social Support → Acculturative Stress	-.45	-.58	.04	-10.90***
English Proficiency → Self-Esteem	-.03	-.05	.03	-.88
Social Support → Self-Esteem	.21	.37	.04	5.84***
Acculturative Stress → Self-Esteem	-.46	-.63	.05	-9.98***

*** $p < .001$.



Note. 1) Dashed line indicates a nonsignificant path.
 2) The coefficients presented in the figure are standardized coefficients.
 3) Control variables (gender, country of residence, start age of study abroad, duration of study abroad, year of study) are omitted from the figure.

*** $p < .001$.

Figure 1: Pathways in which English proficiency, social support, and acculturative stress affect the self-esteem of Korean international college students

Next, a bootstrapping method was used to examine whether the indirect effects of English proficiency and social support on the self-esteem of Korean international college students through acculturative stress were significant (<Table 3>). Both the indirect effect of English proficiency on self-esteem via acculturative stress ($\beta = .18, p < .01$) and the indirect effect of social support on self-esteem through acculturative stress ($\beta = .36, p < .01$) were shown to be positively significant. Finally, examination of the squared multiple correlations (SMCs) revealed that English proficiency explained 72% of the variance in self-esteem, along with social support and acculturative stress. Additionally, English proficiency and social support explained 70% of the variance in acculturative stress.

Table 3: Direct, indirect, and total effects of English proficiency, social support, and acculturative stress on the self-esteem of Korean international college students ($N = 241$)

Path between variables	Standardized coefficient			SMC
	Direct	Indirect	Total	
English proficiency → Self-esteem	-.05	.18**	.14	
Social support → Self-esteem	.37**	.36**	.73**	.72
Acculturative stress → Self-esteem	-.63**		-.63**	
English proficiency → Acculturative stress	-.29**		-.29**	
Social support → Acculturative stress	-.58**		-.58**	.70

Note. 1) Significance was calculated via the bootstrapping method

2) SMC indicates squared multiple correlation

** $p < .01$.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the structural relationships between English proficiency, social support, and acculturative stress, which contribute to the self-esteem of Korean international college students with experience of ESA. Specifically, the direct effects of English proficiency and social support on self-esteem were examined, as were the indirect effects of English proficiency and social support on self-esteem through acculturative stress.

The first hypothesis is not supported by the findings; the direct effect of English proficiency on self-esteem was not significant. Prior studies have shown that self-confidence in English proficiency promotes perceived control over one's life, satisfaction with living in the host country, and academic achievement, all of which could positively influence self-esteem (Pak et al., 1985). Nevertheless, the indirect effect of English proficiency on self-esteem, as mediated by acculturative stress, was significant and greater than the direct effect of English proficiency on self-esteem, highlighting the mediating effect of acculturative stress. These findings highlight the feasibility of concluding that factors such as how well Korean international college students in this study adapt to their host culture or experiences associated with acculturative stress appear to have a greater influence on their self-esteem than other factors do.

Although the results of this study revealed no significant direct association between participants' English proficiency and their self-esteem, acquiring the language of the host country is widely recognized as crucial for individuals' adaptation to the host country (Duru & Poyrazli, 2007). Furthermore, considering that most preceding research has reported a significant relationship between English proficiency and self-esteem, it is necessary to investigate the influence of English proficiency on self-esteem with samples of different characteristics, as well as whether the direct effect of English proficiency on self-esteem varies depending on international students' demographic variables.

As hypothesized, the findings show that social support has a positive direct effect on students' self-esteem. That is, the more perceived social support Korean international college students receive from their families, friends, and significant others while studying abroad, the greater their self-esteem. This finding is consistent with earlier research that revealed a positive relationship between social support and self-esteem among college students from Korea (Shim & Kim, 2022) and various other countries (Asif, 2019; Goodwin et al., 2004). Higher levels of perceived social support are associated with having a positive self-image and believing oneself to be valued (Caplan, 1974). Therefore, the social support that the students in this study perceived from their families, friends, and significant others may have positively impacted their self-esteem, highlighting the crucial role of social support in Korean international college students' self-esteem despite their ESA experience and extended time to adjust to their host country.

In addition, in line with the study's hypothesis, the higher the degree of English proficiency and perceived social support among Korean international college students is, the less acculturative stress they experience, resulting in higher self-esteem. Although no study has examined the mediating effect of acculturative

stress on the relationships among English proficiency, social support, and self-esteem among Korean international college students, this study's results are in line with previous findings indicating significant correlations among English proficiency, acculturative stress, and self-esteem among Asian international college students in the United States (Zhao, 2019), as well as research that reported significant relationships between social support, acculturative stress, and depression (Joo et al., 2015).

Proficiency in the host country's language is essential in adjusting to the host country (Duru & Poyrazli, 2007), and social support is identified as an effective coping mechanism for challenging life changes and minimizing acculturative stress (Kristiana et al., 2022). Therefore, having advanced levels of English proficiency and perceived social support may have helped the participants experience less acculturative stress, thereby improving their self-esteem. The results of this study indicate significant indirect effects of English proficiency and social support on self-esteem via acculturative stress, suggesting that these factors play crucial roles in international college students' cultural adjustment, which affects their self-esteem.

These findings may be valuable resources for institutions, international student counselors, and professionals to promote the self-esteem of international students of different ethnicities, including Korean international students. When helping international students improve their self-esteem, it is important to recognize that both English proficiency and social support can significantly influence acculturative stress. For international students to have high self-esteem, they must experience less acculturative stress; for this to happen, additional resources must be provided to help these students learn English more effectively and efficiently.

Furthermore, various types of social support must be provided to international students so that they can feel a sense of belonging and successfully adjust to their host culture. This can be accomplished through peer programs that pair international students with American or Canadian students, which may enhance their interactions with Caucasian students and thus their English proficiency, as well as informal group sessions where international students gather to share their difficulties, concerns, or study abroad experiences, which can help them reduce the stress that acculturation may generate. In addition, emotional support from parents, friends, and significant others who can be counted on and are comforting in times of difficulty should always be available to international students during the acculturation process. Such additional support from institutions, professionals, and informal networks can enable international students to gain self-confidence not only in their English proficiency but also in their ability to adapt successfully to the host culture.

Limitations and Future Directions

A few limitations of this study should be noted. First, because this is a cross-sectional study, no explicit causal conclusions should be inferred from the findings, and predictive results should be regarded with caution. Second, although

the study's findings indicate substantial differences in all study variables based on participants' country of residence, the study was unable to determine individuals' regions of residence. As a result, it is necessary to investigate how disparities emerge based on regional or community characteristics that may influence attitudes or the atmosphere toward international students in future research. Third, living close to people from the same home country can affect English proficiency, social support, and acculturative stress. However, this study could not explore whether the participants lived near their friends or significant others. Thus, future studies should examine participants' physical proximity and relationships with their friends or significant others, their involvement in Korean communities, and whether they reside in densely populated areas such as the Korean Town. Fourth, this study was unable to gather detailed information or specific characteristics of the participants, such as their families' socioeconomic status, the purpose of studying abroad, motivation for studying abroad, career path expectations, and whether they are studying abroad due to parental pressure or voluntarily. Because such information can have a substantial impact on international students' adjustment in the host country, it is essential to include these aspects in future research. Finally, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to the general population of international students, as they do not represent all Korean international college students with ESA experience studying in the United States and Canada.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study make significant contributions and have several important implications for the literature. First, given the limited number of studies examining how various challenges faced by Korean international college students with ESAs impact their self-esteem, this study investigated the effects of English proficiency, social support, and acculturative stress on their self-esteem. Second, this study examined the direct effects of English proficiency and social support on the self-esteem of Korean international college students, as well as the indirect effects through acculturative stress. While English proficiency had no significant direct effect on self-esteem, the mediating effects of acculturative stress on the links among English proficiency, social support, and self-esteem were significant. This confirmed the mediating role of acculturative stress, which had not previously been examined. Third, most previous research on Korean ESA students has been conducted on students of any age (Lee, 2019); hence, this study contributes to the existing research in that it specifically targeted Korean international college students who have ESA experience and are continuing their postsecondary education at institutions in the host country.

The current findings emphasize the importance of English proficiency, social support, and acculturative stress for Korean international college students' self-esteem, and it is vital to note that these elements continue to affect their self-esteem despite their ESA experience. Additionally, the results of this study may be used as valuable sources for institutions, international student counselors, and

professionals to promote the self-esteem of international students of different ethnicities, including Korean international students.

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