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Abstract

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Keywords

Unaccompanied Korean Adolescents, Precollege International Students, Sociocultural Environments, Personal Relationships, Qualitative Research

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A Qualitative Inquiry into the Life Experiences of Unaccompanied Korean Adolescents in the United States

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Recognizing the lack of comprehensive academic study concerning the life experiences of unaccompanied Korean adolescents overseas, this study inquired into many aspects of the daily life of the young sojourners. In order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of their living experiences, the present study set broad research questions: What do unaccompanied adolescents experience in host homes, schools, and communities in the United States? How do they build personal relationships with people in the United States? How do they deal with new experiences in different sociocultural environments? A total of 31 Korean students in Oklahoma City, Boston, and Dallas participated in in-depth interviews which were analyzed under the methodological guidelines of the grounded-theory method. The analysis of the data revealed two main themes, “unstable personal relationships” and “strange sociocultural environments,” which shed light on how the young students in the study were both psychologically and socially isolated from people and communities in the United States. Each theme was supplemented by several subthemes that characterize the detailed experiences of the participants. As a consequence of those living conditions, they spent a large amount of time in their own rooms by themselves and tended to romanticize their past experiences and relationships in Korea. This study also found that this context was closely associated with their exclusive pattern of mediated communication with people in Korea. Keywords: Unaccompanied Korean Adolescents, Precollege International Students, Sociocultural Environments, Personal Relationships, Qualitative Research

Introduction

While international college students have been a popular subject in intercultural communication research probing a variety of cultural and psychological consequences of these students' global relocation (e.g., Ye, 2006), the results of only a few studies dealing with precollege international students have been reported (e.g., Kuo & Roysircar, 2006). This gap in the research exists not only because the number of precollege international students is much smaller than that of college students, but also because of various ethical issues in conducting research on international minors (Popadiuk, 2010). Consequently, despite the large number of Korean adolescents in English-speaking countries, there have been a limited number of academic studies conducted concerning this population. Moreover, a large number of studies have focused more on educational and psychological consequences than on the life experiences of these students (e.g., Ahn, 2011).

The effects of globalization and economic development in East Asian countries have led to a rapid increase in the international student population in English-speaking countries. During the past decade and a half especially, the number of young international students from Asia attending primary and secondary schools in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand has dramatically increased (Kuo & Roysircar, 2004). Some early studies on these students refer to them as “unaccompanied minors,” “parachute kids,” and “visa

students” (Chiang-Hom, 2004; Ying, 2001; Zhou, 1998). Because of Taiwan’s unstable international status and the vague future of the country in relation to mainland China, the phenomenon of unaccompanied kids in Taiwan began earlier than in Korea; therefore, although studies are sparse, there is scholarship dealing with the psychological issues of Taiwanese unaccompanied sojourners (e.g., Kuo & Roysircar, 2006) focusing on parent-child relationships (Zhou, 1998) and probing the relationship between acculturation and stress (Kuo & Roysircar, 2004). Comparative studies on this population more clearly show the psychological and cultural distinctiveness of unaccompanied young sojourners compared to other immigrant adolescents who live with their parents (Chiang-Hom, 2004; Kuo & Roysircar, 2004).

In many disciplines, including psychology, education, and communication, there have been a large number of studies of Korean international college students (e.g., Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004). However, only a limited number of academic studies focusing exclusively on unaccompanied Korean adolescents has been published; a study conducted in education focused on the influences of curriculum and school culture in the United States in shaping the global perspectives of Korean adolescents (Ahn, 2011); a recent ethnographic study of Korean adolescents in Singapore reported ambivalent experiences of being global and local (Kang, 2013); other studies focused more on the social context of this phenomenon rather than on the microscopic interests of the population (e.g., Kang & Abelmann, 2011). Although these studies covered a wide aspect of Korean early study abroad, they did not particularly look at the life experiences of unaccompanied adolescents. Based on a series of in-depth interviews with unaccompanied Korean adolescents in the United States, the present study focused exclusively on the personal relationships, living conditions, and sociocultural contexts of their lives in the United States.

Unaccompanied Korean Adolescents

According to the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System of the Department of Homeland Security, the number of Korean students who are not U.S. citizens or permanent residents reached 72,295 in 2012 (Project Atlas, 2012). The total number of precollege students has slowly decreased since the economic recession in 2008. However, there were still 18,742 Korean precollege students who enrolled in schools outside their home country in 2012 (KEDI, 2012). Although no statistical report that specifically covers the number of Korean precollege students in a certain country has been published, it is estimated that about 30% of Korean international students in the United States are precollege students (Kim, 2005).

This study’s population is defined with a neologism, *jogi yuhaksaeng*, literally meaning “early study abroad students,” indicating young adolescents who relocate to English-speaking countries for their precollege education. Globalization and a long tradition of competitive education in Korea have been combined into a context that has contributed to the unusual trend of sending young children to English-speaking countries. The excessive competition in a globalized world forces people to be more active in seeking ways to upgrade their socioeconomic status (Ong, 1999).

Although English education has been a top priority in Korea since the early phase of the Korea Republic, the Korean government has created a so-called English boom in recent years by promoting a series of educational reforms in response to the wave of globalization (Park, J-K, 2009). The education industry in Korea and the parents of young students have reacted swiftly to this sociocultural context, recognizing that English proficiency is positively correlated with “occupational success and social mobility” (Koo, 2007, p. 13). In other

words, English skills have become symbolically important human capital in Korean society (Park, J. Y. 2009).

In addition to English skills, degrees from renowned U.S. higher education institutions are also often regarded as passports for a successful life's journey in Korea (Park & Abelman, 2004). Urban legends aside, the facts do tend to support this notion: 65.3% of high-ranking bureaucrats in the current Korean government have foreign degrees, and 75% of them have studied in the United States (Ryu, 2008). Schooling in an English-speaking country also promises a "better" educational environment with less competition and a more humane atmosphere (Koo, 2007). The Korean university entrance examination is infamous for its difficulty and competitiveness, while the process of college admission in the United States is believed to be much easier (Park, J-K, 2009). Therefore, early study in the United States makes it possible for students to evade disadvantageous educational environments and can lead to a socially advantageous career.

The Importance of Understanding Life Experiences

Several studies on unaccompanied adolescents stress the importance of life experiences young sojourners may encounter in their new daily life. First, adolescents still in the process of development may suffer cultural incompetency in a new society, which eventually leads them to stick more to their home ties and culture (Ying, 2001). Multiple studies report that unaccompanied sojourners experience high acculturative stress and homesickness in host societies (Kuo & Roysircar, 2006; Tartakovsky, 2007). Second, the absence of parents in a foreign country is one of the most important contexts of this population because the role of parent and family communication is critical in adolescent development (Larson, Branscomb, & Wiley, 2006). Third, Chiang-Hom (2004) stresses the importance of peer relationships for unaccompanied minors as a force in developing a sense of belonging and forming a community. According to Hartup and Moore (1990), peer relationships are "essential for expanding the child's construction of reality" and socialization (p. 3). However, as expected, interethnic and interracial friendships are more difficult to shape for this age group (Kao & Joyner, 2004). International students commonly misperceive the initial kindness and amiable attitudes of American students toward them as serious friendships (Mori, 2000).

In a series of research projects on unaccompanied Asian international students in Canada, including several Koreans, Popadiuk (2010) found that the young international students experienced a multilayered transitional process that had both positive and negative impacts in their daily lives. Her research suggested that trivial everyday events the students might routinely encounter, such as interacting with teachers and student colleagues, eating new food, and using public facilities, could shape their psychological attitudes toward the process of cultural adjustment.

The present study is a part of my dissertation research focusing on the communication practices and the cultural positioning of unaccompanied Korean high school students in the United States. Since I expected that a comprehensive understanding of participants' daily experiences would bring important clues to understanding their everyday communication practices and attitudes toward their new lives, the research was originally designed to begin with the investigation of the young sojourners' life experiences. Therefore, the present study set broad research questions, including these three: What do unaccompanied adolescents experience in the host homes, schools, and communities in the United States? How do they build personal relationships with people in the United States? How do they deal with their new experiences in different sociocultural environments? In this paper, I categorize two major themes and a conclusive theme reflecting the young sojourners' life experiences in the

United States based on findings from and analyses of a total of 31 semi-structured in-depth interviews. I additionally discuss how the experiences in the lives of young international students are associated with their communication practices in the United States.

The Present Study

Background

This study grew out of my personal experiences not only as an international graduate student in the United States but also as the uncle of two nieces who relocated to the United States for the purpose of their secondary education. Furthermore, I was an English tutor working to support the educational success of Korean high school students living in the United States. Korean communities are known for well-to-do children who attend expensive private high schools, spend a lot of money on accommodations, and return to Korea every summer. Nevertheless, I heard complaints constantly from these affluent children, which stemmed mainly from their living environments, which they thought of as living with strangers. For example, my niece once complained about having to eat frozen chicken nuggets with her host family. Not surprisingly, many of these Korean students looked forward to summer vacations when they could return to their homes in Korea. However, it was not uncommon upon their return to the United States for them to complain about the fact that they did not really get a summer vacation. Their time at home was primarily spent in SAT and TOEFL preparation institutes.

These young sojourners are objectified in many ways. For their parents, these students are supposed to glorify the family name by entering prestigious colleges in the United States. For businesses, these young students are sources of huge profits. Agencies for early study abroad, private institutes for English education, mass media, and many schools and embassies in English-speaking countries literally make millions off the ambition of these students. For academic researchers, these students are merely variables to be tested in an attempt to find relationships among cultural adaptation, academic productivity, linguistic skills, age, parents' SES, and so on. The world often does not seem to genuinely care about the wellbeing of these adolescents.

Grounded in my own experiences and with a critical mind toward the social circumstances, I planned this study to increase understanding of young students' daily experiences in a foreign country. I expected my findings to be a wake-up call for people who are related to this industry. In order to fully engage in the present study, I took graduate courses (such as adolescent development) and participated in multiple seminars on developmental psychology, allowing me to have more intimate and productive conversations with my two nieces and five pupils. These academic and practical experiences in this field helped me recruit participants easily and build rapport with young students quickly.

Participants

There are no specific statistic data indicating how many Korean students study in U.S. cities. While universities have official demographic data for enrolled international students, secondary schools barely note official numbers of international students. The Korean government reports only the total number of Korean students in the United States rather than more specific demographic data in certain cities and schools in the United States.

This research was first conducted in the metro area of Oklahoma City (hereafter, OKC) because I, as a doctoral student at the University of Oklahoma, was familiar with the Korean community in OKC. Even though it is not difficult to find after-school institutes for

Koreans and early study abroad agencies in major U.S. cities, including Boston and Dallas, OKC is not known as a popular destination for early study abroad; there is no after-school institute for Koreans and no early study abroad agency owned by Koreans. When a series of interviews was conducted in 2010, many participants in OKC complained about the limited number of Korean friends in their communities and their monotonous daily life caused by the lack of public transportation and few places to go in the city. Guided by those findings, I conducted the next phase of data collection in a bigger city than OKC in terms of general population, population density, and the size of the Korean community.

Although the Korean American population in Boston is smaller than in other major cities such as Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago, Boston is well known in Korea as being the most popular destination for early study abroad. Despite the lack of official demographic information, it was easy to find various commercials and information identifying Boston as the most popular site. There are over 20 after-school institutes and 11 study-abroad agencies for Korean students (Bostonkorea, 2011). These businesses are mainly located near the Cambridge campus of Harvard University and in downtown Boston. Although four participants did not live near the area where Korean businesses were densely located, they could easily reach Korean communities and downtown Boston by commuter train and bus. Based on Federal Transit Administration data, Boston is ranked as having the fourth-best public transportation system in the United States (Kurtzleben, 2011). Unlike the participants in OKC, the participants in Boston could easily become involved in Korean communities because both of the larger size of the Korean communities and convenient transportation.

The final phase of data collection was conducted in Dallas in late 2010. Dallas, one of the largest cities in the southwestern region, has a relatively large Korean community. There were also multiple Korean business centers in the Dallas metro area at the time of this study. While Dallas is larger than Boston in terms of population, there were fewer education-related businesses than in Boston: 11 after-school institutes and four study-abroad agencies for Korean students (Dalsaram, 2011). Unlike Boston, Korean businesses in the Dallas metro area are spread throughout multiple suburban centers like Carrollton, Plano, and Allen. Since the Dallas metro area ranks 99th among 100 U.S. urban areas in terms of the accessibility to public transit (Lindenberger, 2011), the living environment for unaccompanied minors was expected to be different from that in Boston.

The Institutional Review Board initially approved the whole research project including the present study for the metropolitan area of OKC, followed by approval for Boston and Dallas (IRB no. 12066). In compliance with the approval, all participants were over 18-years-old and were either juniors or seniors in high school. Although participants were still high school students, parental consent was not required because they were legally adults according to U.S. law. Since the first semester of an academic year begins in March in Korea, there are usually some technical problems when Korean students transfer to American high schools. Therefore, Korean high school students usually lose a semester in order to be in line with the American academic calendar. Moreover, many Korean high school students spend around a year practicing English before they transfer to American high schools. For this reason, Korean juniors and seniors are usually older than American students. The students in this study had been in the United States at least one year, and they did not live with their parents. All participants entered the United States on an F-1 student VISA, which is a nonimmigrant VISA that foreign students are required to obtain in order to enroll in schools in the United States. Since the U.S. government does not allow precollege international students who are F-1-student-VISA holders to attend public schools, all participants in this study were enrolled in private high schools.

The sampling of this study was purposive. With the help of several key informants in each city, I purposefully recruited participants who were not accompanied by their parents,

lived with host families, and had been in the United States over one year. This study also utilized snowball sampling. I was able to recruit additional participants who were introduced by initially recruited participants. A key informant, who was also a Korean high school student in OKC and a friend of my niece, helped recruit participants in OKC. In Boston, a Korean teacher who taught English to Korean students at a private institute introduced eight students to me. A participant in Boston also helped me recruit another two students. In Dallas, a former student of mine introduced two participants, and those two students helped me recruit four additional participants.

Table 1:

Demographic Information of Participants

Category	Number of Participants
Current City	
OKC	15 (Male: 8, Female: 7)
Boston	10 (Male: 7, Female: 3)
Dallas	6 (Male: 4, Female: 2)
Age	
18	17 (Male: 11, Female: 6)
19	14 (Male: 8, Female: 6)
Years in the US	
1-2	10 (Male: 6, Female: 4)
2-3	19 (Male: 13, Female: 6)
4-	2 (Male: 0, Female: 2)

Data Analysis

Based on a pilot study with my niece, her friend, and a key informant in 2008, I initially developed 23 open-ended questions in three categories: general questions about the participants, questions regarding the uses of communication technology, and questions regarding everyday communication and interpersonal relationships. The first phase of data collection from three participants in Oklahoma was conducted with this set of questions. Following the methodological guidelines of the grounded theory method, I began data analysis as soon as the first data were collected (Charmaz, 2006). The first data analysis allowed me to add more questions and categories to the interview protocol for the next phases of data collection. For example, there were several students who had lived in the United States when they were younger for various reasons, and their early experiences influenced their current lives in the United States. Therefore, I added questions like “Had you visited the U. S. before you came to study here?” Instead of changing the third category of questions, I added two more categories. The fourth category consisted of nine additional questions aimed to identify detailed cultural familiarities and changes in the young sojourners. The fifth category was also added to obtain data regarding participants’ cultural identities. In this category, some indirect questions like “Do you want to be an American citizen?” were developed in order to encourage participants to show a variety of their concerns about themselves. Therefore, the next phases of data collection in the three cities were conducted with five categories and a total of 52 questions (Appendix 1).

The length of the interviews varied from one to two hours because I did not restrain participants from telling their stories, even if the stories were not related to the study. All interviews were conducted at coffee shops or fast-food restaurants.

I transcribed interviews verbatim in Korean for data analysis and the length of the transcription of each interview ranged from 13 to 21 single-spaced pages. I coded the data by

repeatedly reading the fully transcribed interviews in order to compare interviews and find similarities and differences in the data, which eventually led to finding common themes. The coding process was divided into multiple steps. First, a list of codes, such as “the lack of personal relationships with American classmates (Am F)” and “restricted mobility (RM),” was made after reading the transcripts repeatedly. Second, after being compared to one another multiple times, similar and related responses from different participants were inserted in the same column on a workbook in Excel. Third, each code was assigned an inserted response, and only exclusively related responses were left in the same column. In this process, those responses that did not fit in a code or that fit in more than one code were adjusted so they would fit in a code. In the course of adjustments, a subtheme, “stressful relationship with housemates,” was extracted. Fifth, I selected and underlined important comments representing each theme. This process was conducted not only for refining the properties of each theme but also for describing the essential nature of the themes (Thorne, 2000). These underlined comments and their corresponding themes were reviewed by a colleague, a native of Korea, at my institution in order to insure reliability. During the process of data analysis, each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

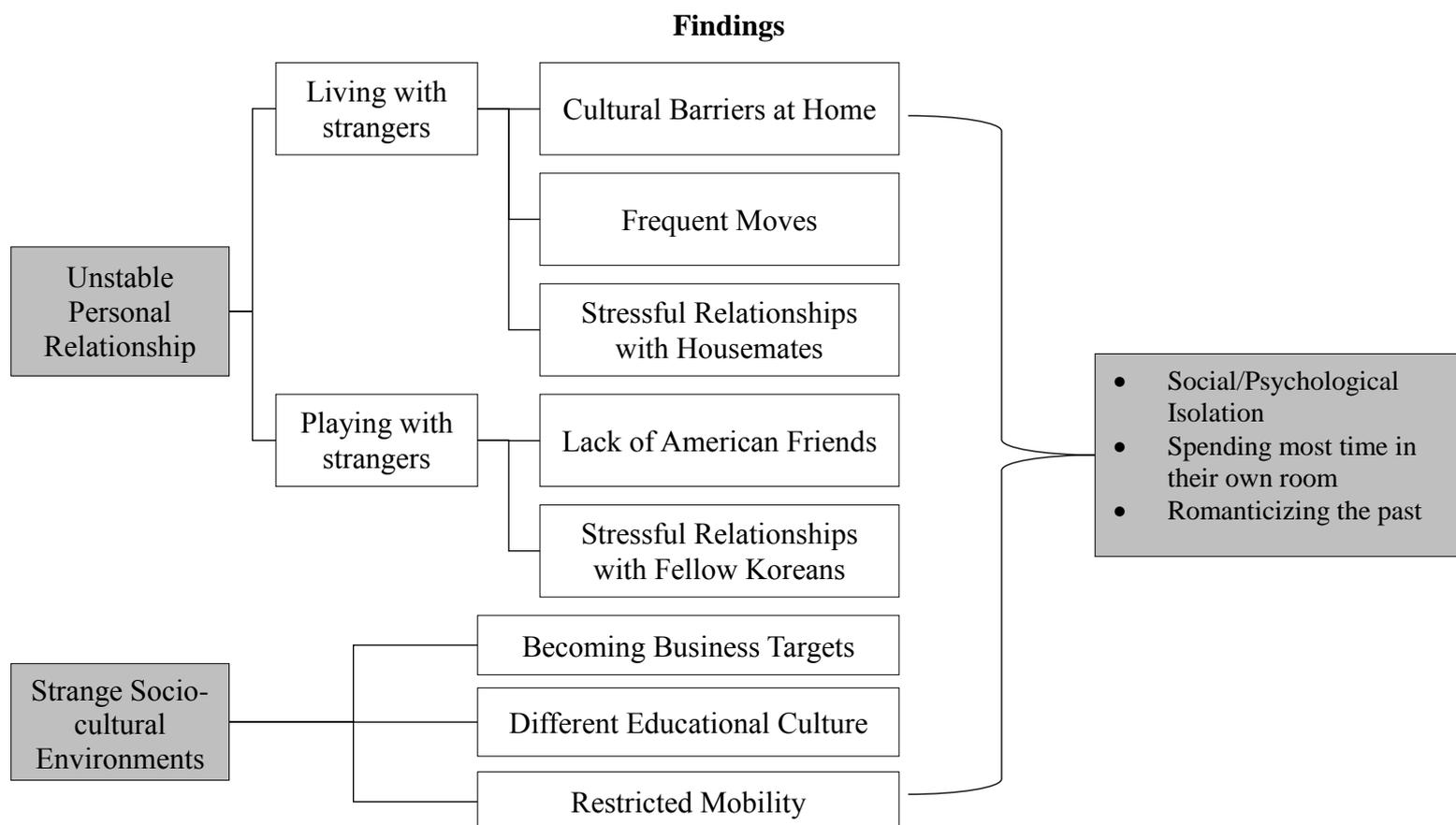


Figure 1. Summary of findings

Theme 1: Unstable Personal Relationships

Living with strangers

Living without parents in a foreign country was the most prominent contextual difference distinguishing this study's population from other same-age adolescents. All

participants in this study lived with host families, relatives, or their parents' friends in the United States. Although all participants were over the age of 18 and did not require legal guardians, they all had legal guardians. Regardless of the legal requirements, some American high schools require official guardians for international students for safety reasons. Since the host home was the place where the unaccompanied adolescents began and ended their days, their experiences and relationships with host families are crucial in understanding their living contexts. Despite the importance of personal relationships at home, many participants failed to build stable and sound relationships with their hosts.

Language and culture at home

Most participants, except those who had lived in English-speaking countries before coming to the United States for their precollege education, suffered from having insufficient English skills to communicate with their host families. According to many participants, they were initially worried about language skills at school. However, their insufficient English skills created more problems in the host homes than at school. English at school was firmly based on textbooks and ordinary lectures, and there were Korean classmates who helped each other. On the other hand, many participants said they were reluctant to become involved in situations in their host homes because they felt it was difficult to express subtle emotions, opinions, and questions in daily life. For example, Jisuk in OKC said, "At my first host home, I only spoke to them during meal time. Even at the table, I only used very simple English. I rarely asked my host mom to do something for me. I just did it myself. That was much more comfortable for me."

However, language was not the only issue raised by participants in describing the difficult experience of adjustment to new home. Because of the emphasis on traditional family culture in Korea, many people, even members of the younger generation, tend to view divorced or single-parent families negatively. In this study, eight participants lived or had lived with single-parent families. Hyun in Boston pointed out the unstable financial condition of her single host mom: "She seemed to need money desperately. With three children, her life looked so tough. She was always crazy about money. Though I understood her situation and felt sympathy for her, I knew I did not have to live there."

Table 2:
Host Home Experience

Category	Number of Participants
Current Host	
Korean (Korean American)	11
Non-Korean	15
Relative or Acquaintance	5
Number of hosts experienced for the past 2 years	
1	5
2	13
3	8
4 or more	5

Although Korean host families shared language and culture with the young students, different family cultures still became a stressor for them. Joon in OKC lived with a Korean host family who enjoyed social and family gatherings at home. Although he first liked new experiences with diverse people, he became tired of being awkward with strangers. Eventually, he began avoiding family occasions and began to feel distant from them. On the

other hand, Chang in Boston had experienced a serious conflict with his previous host, who was his father's old friend, because of his oppressive parenting style.

Only four participants in this study expressed overall satisfaction in their relationships with members of their current host homes. Most of the participants did not succeed in building, and did not even intend to build, long-term relationships with host family members. Their overall unsatisfactory experiences in host homes were closely linked to the next subtheme.

Frequent moves

Only five participants had never changed host homes. There are several reasons the young students changed hosts, including everyday conflicts with host family members, cultural maladjustments in a host home, transferring to schools in another geographical region, early termination by hosts, and complications in the business relationship among the students, hosts, and professional agents.

Hana, who lived in Dallas with a host family, had experienced five different host families in eighteen months and was currently planning another move at the time her interview was conducted. Her first experience ended due to conflicts with a host child, with whom Hana was sharing a bedroom. The second host was too busy to take care of Hana. The host family was supposed to provide transportation to and from school yet did not, resulting in Hana's experiencing high levels of unnecessary stress. Trouble concerning money plagued her relationship with her third host family. According to Hana, although the host did not actually ask Hana for money, Hana was still stressed with worries about money because the host mom kept reminding her that she should charge Hana for certain services: "Even when she gave me a ride to a Korean grocery that was near her home, she kept saying that this ride might cost over \$20." Not all of Hana's experiences were negative, though. Her experience with her fourth host, who was the first American (Vietnamese American) host for Hana, was positive. She had no problems over money, transportation, or cultural differences. However, she had to move to a Korean host home after living there only a short time. Though she did not know the exact reason that her agency forced her to move to another host home, she suspected the host family was asked by the agency to pay more for being a member of the program. After a semester of living with her fifth host, who was a Korean American minister, she planned to move to another place because of poor services. Hana complained that Korean American host families treated the host function as a business venture in which the Korean high school students became victims of the host family's efforts to extort money from the students.

These extreme cases were not isolated incidents, as most of the participants shared stories that indicated a frequency of change in living arrangements due to instability experienced with the various host families. The frequent moves hindered the young sojourners' ability to build more permanent relationships with hosts. Thus, unsatisfactory experiences in host homes, frequent moves, and unstable personal relationships with hosts created a vicious circle.

Living with other Korean students

Many host families with whom the participants lived were actively involved in the early study abroad business. In fact, many of them served as host families for multiple international students, especially Korean students. Only three participants had never lived with other Korean international students in their host homes, so for most of the participants, student housemates easily became important actors shaping the everyday lives of the young

sojourners. Regardless of the relationship with host family members, some of those who shared their space with other international students endured hardships relating to conflicts that developed in a variety of interactions.

Yuna had a housemate who was also a Korean early study abroad student at her first host home in a small city in Pennsylvania before she moved to Boston. The foremost reason she relocated to Boston was not for educational purposes, but because of endless conflicts with her Korean housemate. They were forced to spend most of the time and space in their everyday lives together because of their identical situations and schedules. She was extremely stressed by her situation and felt she needed to put in extra effort to understand everything about her housemate in order to not cause any problems. Similarly, Doosik in Dallas lived for only a short period with his first host family, who had two other Korean high school students. According to Doosik, living with multiple Korean students had a negative effect on his academic performance, especially in the area of improving his English skills. While he did not have conflicts with his Korean housemates, he described frequently losing control over his schedule and studying, and thus he wasted time on meaningless activities.

As explained above, the presence of housemates created extraordinary experiences in host homes for many of the students interviewed. Consequently, these experiences became crucial sources of everyday stress for the students.

Playing with strangers

Hardship in making American friends

With few exceptions, most participants in this study were concerned about the limited number of friends they had in the United States. It is difficult to make friends in a foreign country, which becomes a deep source of stress for young students. Many participants pointed out that superficial friendships among Americans were the most important cultural differences. In the case of Dana in OKC, although she had many American friends compared to other participants, she did not think they were true friends. Wonsang in Boston did not believe American students had experienced true friendship because he thought personal relationships among American classmates were very casual and shallow. Hana also pointed out the attitude of American classmates toward their friends. She said, "They seemed to be friendly at first, but they really weren't. They just acted like a friend. They were not interested in others. The concept of friend in America is very different."

Table 3:
Peer Relationships

Category	Number of Participants		
	OKC	Boston	Dallas
Best group of friends			
Koreans in Korea	11	6	5
Koreans in the US	3	4	1
Non-Korean	1		
Number of Non-Korean Friends in the US			
None	7	5	3
1-2	5	5	2
3-5	2		1
5 and More	1		

On the other hand, most participants did not name the language barrier explicitly in explaining their limited friendship with American classmates. Minkee even said, "I had some American friends for the first several months. My English was much worse than now. I thought they were friends. But now, it wasn't really friendship. I speak English much better than before. But I hardly talk to American guys at school." It could also be that they initially lost opportunities to develop solid friendships with Americans because of the language barrier. However, many participants still blamed peer culture as the main cause of their limited interpersonal relationships with American classmates.

American private schools are more or less closed communities; many students have attended the same school as far back as kindergarten. Most participants in this study transferred to their American schools between 8th and 11th grade. Jooho in Dallas articulated the problem he first faced when coming to the United States: "Most of the classmates have been friends for a long time. They have known each other since kindergarten. How could I get involved among those? That was impossible." Some students felt isolated when they found out that many family members of students who came to concerts or homecoming festivals were also alumni of the school.

On the other hand, some participants in Boston shared the belief that they did not need to try to make American friends because of the presence of many Korean students in Boston, which is one of the most popular destinations for Korean students. Taewon had not talked to American classmates for a long time. He had plenty of Korean friends in school and the Boston Korean community. He also said that in school he only talked to Korean classmates and other Asians. Although this study did not probe the issue of cultural similarities and differences, Taewon and Seewon especially expressed their cultural closeness to other Asians over American classmates. In this matter, the cultural understanding between Korean and American students seemingly hindered the formation of good relationships.

Hardship in maintaining Korean friends

The relatively small number of Korean students in American schools also created complications regarding peer relationships among the Korean sojourners. While the presence of Korean classmates sometimes helped by providing stable personal relationships, it also became an important source of stress because they felt pressure to maintain good relationships with the limited number of Korean friends.

First, their inter-Korean relationships were often affected by their friendship with American classmates. More than a third of the participants shared direct and indirect stories about how repulsed they felt by Korean students who behaved like American students and actively tried to pursue friendships with Americans. Jin in OKC had suffered from conflicts with other Korean students in school. She initially tried to develop close relationships with American classmates because she thought American friends would help her improve her English skills and cultural understanding. However, other Korean students did not like her behavior as it was different from typical Korean students in her school.

Second, most participants were concerned about the small size of the Korean student community. This condition forced students to become extremely cautious in their maintenance of interpersonal relationships with other Korean students. Dowon in Dallas told a story that illustrates what can happen when possibilities for friendships are limited: "I have two Korean friends in school and we also live together at the same host home. They often complain about our host mom though I don't hate her at all. But I can't stop them, and won't try because I don't want to get them upset. They are the only friends here."

Third, more than half of the participants experienced relatively unsatisfactory relationships with Korean classmates in the United States compared to relationships with

their old friends in Korea. During interviews, participants were asked which group was the best group of friends among

- a) Korean friends in Korea,
- b) Korean friends in the United States, or
- c) non-Korean friends in the United States.

A total of 22 participants out of 31 chose the first group as their best group of friends although they had already spent over one year without physical contact with those friends. This reflected their depending on the comfort of old relationships established in Korea rather than developing new relationships in the United States.

In sum, the lack of direct parental care and limited peer relationships were the price for early study abroad in the United States. Throughout the interviews, many participants frequently stressed their situations, saying “because I don’t have parents here” or “because I don’t have many friends.” Social isolation was the main cause of their everyday loneliness and boredom. The lonely adolescents spent most after-school hours in their private rooms alone. Their lonely everyday lives were also related to the next theme.

Theme 2: Strange Sociocultural Environments

This study examined participants’ daily experiences in host homes, schools, and after-school activities. Many participants commonly encountered difficulties in negotiating different customs, cultures, and systems in their everyday lives. Meanwhile, relying heavily on a limited number of early study abroad agents and host families in the United States, the young sojourners not only spent a large amount of money for the service, but also became aware of the business relationships among agents and host families, which caused uncomfortable experiences for the young students in their communities. They also experienced a very different social atmosphere caused mainly by the relative lack of public transportation in the United States. This study found that the students’ usual places, like homes and schools, occasionally made them feel estranged from their living environments. Along with limited interpersonal relationships, their strange experiences in everyday settings became important contextual backgrounds of their loneliness in the United States and their romanticization of things and people in Korea.

Being in the business world

Since participants and their parents had only limited information about American schools, cities, and environments, they relied strongly on professional agencies to find host families, choose schools, and handle many other everyday affairs. Although the young students had a good understanding of their business relationships with the agencies, host families, and schools, they often thought of the business relationships negatively because they felt they had become targets for profit, particularly by professional agencies.

In Dallas, Hana, Noah, and Jooho, who were guided by the same agent, said that the agent had complex relationships with many host families, local private schools, and private after-school institutes. Hana and Noah explicitly complained about his aggressive business practices, which resulted in extra money being extracted from them. Nevertheless, they chose not to raise concerns about him because they were worried that their words could spread across the whole Korean community rapidly; they wanted to avoid conflicts that might occur between people who knew him and themselves.

On the other hand, participants in Boston were pressured by the highly commercialized environment of the Korean international student community in Boston. Sungil and Seewon lived with a Korean host who built a separate building to accommodate a total of four Korean students. Although they paid \$2,500 per month for accommodations and guardian services, they spent all their time at the host home by themselves. Chang once had a serious conflict at school, but he did not want to let his parents know about it. Although he wanted to find a new school, he gave up that idea soon because his agent asked a large amount of money, citing complicated rules over the issue.

The young sojourners initially expected that Korean American adults would be the most reliable people in the United States because they were fellow Koreans and knew much about American society and culture. However, this high expectation turned into disappointment. In fact, their disappointment with Korean (American) adults was deeper than the disappointment with American adults. Most participants in all three cities were worried that their bad relationships with some Korean adults might negatively affect their relationships with other Koreans in their community.

The young students did not have to deal with this kind of situation in Korea under their parents' protection. For the adolescents who had little experience in the business world, relationships with adults occasionally became heavy stressors, which led them to seek support from people and media resources in Korea.

Educational culture

The most distinguishing difference identified by the participants between Korean and American schools concerned classroom structures. In Korea, students who are in the same class, called *Bahn*, rarely move to other classrooms in order to take different subject classes, but instead, teachers of different subjects move among the classrooms. In other words, students in a classroom take the same subject with the same classmates virtually all the time. Students' lockers are also located in a classroom in Korea, and at most schools, students are provided school meals in their classrooms. According to my participants, the Korean system is more advantageous than the American system in terms of the opportunity to establish friendships. Hyun said, "I hover around my school once every hour. I casually am greeted by some Americans, but it's always awkward. I miss my school in Korea. We had many fun things."

Required sports activities in American education is the aspect of American schools the participants liked most; they especially enjoyed the variety of choices of activities in contrast to Korean high schools. However, those activities also sometimes segregated them from American students. Several participants participated in sports activities. Jooho said that his time participating in sports at school was the most enjoyable and best opportunity to make American friends. On the contrary, Sungil never socialized with his teammates after the sports activities, even though he maintained good relationships with them during the activities. Giwook also had no real friends among his American teammates. Others who were not active in sports activities often expressed feeling estranged when seeing American classmates who got actively involved in a variety of team sports.

Sports activities sometimes became a point of stress for Korean female students, who rarely had chances to participate in sporting events in their Korean schools. In Korea, where college preparation is always the first priority for students, parents, and school authorities, arts and sports education are often ignored. Many schools expediently replace these subjects with extra English and mathematics classes, which are the most dominant subjects on the Korean SAT. Nevertheless, male students are active in organizing various sports like basketball and soccer on their own. However, female students in Korea tend to not participate

in those activities. Some female participants complained about their lack of athletic ability, which they believed most American girls have: Heeson said, “I am so stressed out when I have to be a tennis partner of my teammates. They are so good at tennis. I’m not. I just do it because it is a requirement. They might laugh at me often.”

Although there were various activities in which they participated, either because they chose to or because participation was mandatory, many students in this study tended to regard their high school education in the United States merely as a course they needed to pass to fulfill the purpose of early study abroad: entering an American college. Combined with isolated feelings in their everyday activities at school, this skewed orientation hindered their involvement in various school affairs.

The different after-school culture in the United States was another challenge. All participants in this study had attended private after-school institutes called *Hakwon* when they were in Korea. While this extended private education was perceived negatively by young students because they interpreted it as an additional intensive working experience, it was also positively remembered as an enjoyable time spent with many close friends. More than a third of the participants disliked their open schedules after school in the United States and complained about the disorganization of their everyday lives. Some of these participants said they had never scheduled anything for themselves in Korea. Their schedule in Korea, which was filled with private after-school classes, was mainly organized by their parents and counselors from the private institutes. For these passive adolescents, time management after school hours was a big challenge. When their time was not controlled, they mindlessly surfed the Internet and easily became heavy Internet users.

Restricted mobility

All participants in OKC raised issues concerning places to go, which meant they did not have many choices of places to go during their free time. All participants in Dallas, except Doosik, who owned a car, also pointed out the same problem. On the other hand, participants in Boston were worried about wasting money, in part because they had too many Korean-related places in which to socialize with other Korean friends.

Many participants, particularly in OKC and Dallas, blamed inconvenient transportation as the most significant contributor to everyday stress. Even in Boston, despite its relatively good transportation system, some participants also complained about insufficient transportation. Everyday life was affected by the lack of public transportation systems in the United States, which is very different from Korea. For the young students from Korea, where public transportation is well connected, American public transportation is substandard. Their different experiences with and expectations about transportation tended to increase the sojourners’ stress; when asked questions about transportation, answers usually began with the phrase “When I was in Korea...”

Those who had no transportation option other than the host family’s car felt uneasy whenever they asked host-family members for transportation to someplace other than school. Thus, they sometimes gave up on social life with friends. On the other hand, most participants in Boston had a different problem—transportation costs. Public transportation costs in Boston are relatively high compared to those in Korea. Also, the young students frequently used taxis to reach Korean businesses to meet with friends. While four participants in Boston lived on the outskirts of the city, where their parents believed it to be safer and more conducive to a better education, their destinations were located in downtown areas.

In sum, the social environment restricting their mobility in many ways forced them to spend large amounts of time at host homes, which strengthened feelings of isolation and loss of control over their free time.

A Conclusive Theme: Isolation and Romanticization

The aforementioned themes and subthemes drive a twofold conclusive theme; first, the socially isolated and environmentally estranged young international students spent a tremendous amount of time in their own rooms; second, they commonly displayed their idealization of their lives in Korea.

The insufficient social relationships of the young sojourners forced them to build rather exclusive relationships with fellow Korean students. However, because of the limited number of Koreans, their peer activities tended to be simple. In addition to limited personal relationships, their restricted mobility as unaccompanied minors confined them to their host homes. At home, many participants also felt instability because of the temporary nature of their residency and a different family culture. Most of them could not build stable relationships with host family members and housemates. In this situation, their isolated rooms at home were usually considered to be secure from stresses that could be encountered during unexpected and undesirable moments with people who were strangers to them.

On the other hand, many participants compared their difficult experiences in the United States to their pleasant memories of Korea. These romanticizing behaviors were deeply rooted in each theme of this study; as continually indicated before, their dissatisfaction with their living environments, people, and sociocultural experiences were important stress points in their everyday lives in the United States. Facing these stressful moments, the young students glamorized their past experiences in Korea.

Table 4:
After-School Experience

Category	Number of Participants		
	OKC	Boston	Dallas
How often hang out with friends			
1 day or less	4	2	2
2-3 days	10	5	4
5 days or more	1	3	0
*Where to go with friends			
Friend's home or host home	13	5	6
Korean places (restaurant, karaoke, etc.)	3	10	6
Shopping mall	12	4	6
*What to do at host home			
Internet surfing	14	10	6
Consuming Korean media content	11	9	5
Internet Messaging, phone call	14	10	6
Video (computer) games	4	2	2
Watching TV in the living room	3	1	0
Studying	13	9	6
Talking with host family and housemates	4	2	2

Note. Category with asterisk (*) was counted multiple times.

Their longing for life in Korea could be attributed mainly to their different experiences of personal relationships in the two countries. The lack of direct parental care and limited peer relationships were the common living conditions for the unaccompanied adolescents. These unsatisfactory experiences contrasted sharply with their social life in

Korea. This romanticizing the past became more noticeable when they talked about their educational experiences in Korea.

As reviewed earlier, Korean educational culture is characterized by words like *testocracy* and *educational hell* that are commonly mentioned both in academic studies and media coverage on Korean educational problems (Lee & Larson, 2000). Many participants in this study also showed their own and their parents' concerns about the extremely competitive nature of Korean education when they decided to come to the United States for their secondary-school education. Knowing this circumstance, it might be reasonable to expect that they would have bad memories about their Korean educational experiences. However, more than half of the participants remembered positively their life during and after school hours; although they had tight schedules involving a number of extra studying activities, they still had more chances to socialize with friends at various places near their schools and homes. Even if they remembered negatively the extremely competitive education in Korea, their days at schools and *Hakwon* were often recalled as enjoyable experiences with many friends.

In sum, the young students recognized clearly that sociocultural conditions were deeply related to their unstable personal relationships in the United States. Confined in monotonous and restricted everyday lives, they were concerned about their limited social lives while idealizing their past in Korea. However, they were not always passive in confronting their living conditions. Although isolation and romanticization characterized their daily experiences in the United States for the most part, the young sojourners also developed their own communicative strategies corresponding to their needs.

Concluding Remarks: In Regards to Communication

Their isolated time in their own rooms was not always problematic for them. Their attitude about this isolation was somewhat self-contradictory because while they constantly complained about their lack of personal relationships, estranged feelings in sociocultural activities, and restricted mobility, they often regarded their isolation as voluntary rather than a forced. Soo said, "I like time in my room. Yes, I don't have many friends to hang out here. But I stay at home not because I don't have friends. I like to loaf in my room. I do usually the Internet. As other Korean guys do, I chat with friends in Korea and watch Korean TV shows. Love my very relaxed time."

The unaccompanied adolescents eagerly embraced the physically isolated time because it allowed them to connect with familiar things and people in Korea. In addition, the time in their rooms was more secure, free from everyday stresses caused by living with strangers, having a limited number of friends, experiencing nowhere to go, and so on. The idle hours in their rooms were extended social moments for them, connecting them to familiar people, memories, images, and language through ready-to-use communication technologies. Without exception, all participants in this study had their own laptop computers and subscribed to a high-speed Internet service. For them, advanced communication technology became the major outlet for maintaining their personal relationships with family members and friends in Korea and entertaining themselves with familiar media content from Korea.

First of all, the Internet was an important channel for them to receive parental care. The unaccompanied adolescents were still heavily dependent on their parents in many aspects of everyday life. More importantly, many participants talked exclusively to their parents when they had issues to share with adults, even though host family members and school teachers lived closer to them. While a few participants still preferred a traditional method of long-distance communication, international calls, many others adopted various new communication technologies, including social media, Internet instant messaging, and the

Internet phone. Internet communication was inexpensive and ready to use, and it gratified their need to communicate with their parents.

Their needs for interpersonal (mediated) communication were more intensely expressed in response to peer relationships. Despite the long distance, most participants pointed out friends in Korea as their closest group of friends. Keeping in touch with old friends in Korea was important motivation for Internet communication for the young sojourners, who had limited peer relationships in the United States. They used new communication technologies intensively because these technologies provided ways for more substantial interactions with distant friends than traditional telecommunication technologies did. The lonely adolescents wanted to see their friends' photos, send secret messages to their best friends, and chat about their favorite entertainers in more instant ways. These needs led them to actively use social media and Internet instant messaging. Especially for those who wanted to maintain close relationships with old friends in Korea, social media were the main routes for interacting with friends. Although some participants said such virtual activity sometimes aggravated their loneliness because of the lack of physical contact, many participants still thought that online peer activities helped them maintain close relationships with distant friends whom they still considered as their closest groups of friends.

New technologies in their private spaces not only satisfied their yearning to connect with old ties, but also became a major channel of entertainment for the lonely adolescents. Most participants consumed Korean media content by using the Internet on a daily basis. Their heavy use of Korean media on the Web reflected "escapism," which was emphasized by Korgaonkar and Wolin (1999) as one of the important needs satisfied by Internet use. For the lonely international students who did not have many options for activities to do after school, watching familiar scenes and people on the Internet was a good means of escaping from psychological burdens. Many participants pointed out Korean cultural sensibility as a reason they preferred Korean media content. Since their media consumption mainly aimed to relieve everyday stress and to provide entertainment after school, the young sojourners preferred content that was easier to understand and laugh at.

This study presented reasons the young sojourners spent a large amount of time in their own rooms at host homes without active social interactions with people in the United States. In strange living environments in a new place, the young sojourners tended to attach to their memories of their lives and of people in Korea. On one hand, the tremendous number of hours spent in their private spaces after school reflected their lonely and isolated lives in the United States. However, the time was also valuable for the unaccompanied minors to maintain their transnational connectivity with people in Korea and to escape from continuous psychological burdens caused by unfamiliar daily life. The present study did not directly develop an argument for a cause and effect type of relationship because of the complex interrelatedness among people, living conditions, the purpose of sojourning, technological availability, and so on. Nevertheless, the findings of this study call for a more comprehensive approach to understanding the life experiences and daily living conditions of unaccompanied minors before narrowly investigating the psychological consequences and communicative effects of global relocations.

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Appendix 1: Interview Protocol (English)

Introduction:

Hello, how are you? My name is Taesik Kim and I am a graduate student in the Department of Communication at OU. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to interview you. The theme of the interview is about your uses of communication technology like the Internet and mobile phones and your everyday communications with both Koreans and Americans. Please feel free to respond to the questions. Before we get started, I would like you to know that I will not address you by name during the interview. You can also withdraw from the process at any time you want.

Questions regarding life experiences

- 1) Which city/region were you from in Korea?
- 2) How long have you been in the U.S.?
- 3) Could you tell me why you attend a high school in the U.S.?
- 4) Have you ever attended another American school? If yes, tell me about where you were and why you moved here.
- 5) Are you living with an American host family? How many families have you lived with the U. S.?
- 6) Do you have close family members who regularly contact you in the U. S.?
- 7) How much English did you know or speak when you came to the U.S.?
- 8) Have you visited the U. S. before you came to study here? Have you traveled to foreign countries? Tell me about your experiences.
- 9) What was the first impression of the U. S. and your city?
- 10) Who did initially want you to study in the U. S.?

Questions regarding the uses of communication technology

- 1) How familiar are you with the Internet?
- 2) How familiar are you with mobile phones? Have you had a mobile phone in Korea?
- 3) What is the home page of your Web browser? Is it a Korean Web service or an American service? Could you tell me why you set it as your home page? Tell me about your usual activities on the Internet.
- 4) What are your purposes for using the Internet?
- 5) How many Korean friends in Korea do you interact with on the Web? How many American friends? How many Korean friends in the U. S.? Tell me about your activities on online social networking services.
- 6) Are you using an Internet instant messenger? If yes, which are you using? Who are your messenger friends? How often do you chat with Koreans? How often do you chat with Americans? Could you tell me about your activities on the messenger?
- 7) If you have a mobile phone, could you tell me how many times you usually call or text Koreans who live either in Korea or America? How often do you call or text Americans?
- 8) Do you have a Korean Internet phone (070)? If yes, tell me about your everyday communication via the phone.

- 9) Could you tell me about the differences between your mobile communication activities in Korea and in the U.S.?
- 10) How many hours do you watch television? What do you like to watch?
- 11) Do you watch Korean TV shows? If yes, how and why do you watch?
- 12) Could you tell me about the differences between Korean TV programs and American TV programs?

Questions regarding personal relationships and social network

- 1) How often do you call your parents in Korea? What do you usually talk to your parents about?
- 2) How often do you personally talk to your teachers in your school? What do you usually talk to them about?
- 3) How often do you talk to your host family about everyday life? How do you feel when you are talking to them?
- 4) How often do you hang out with American friends in your school? What do you usually do with them?
- 5) Do you feel it is hard to make American friends? Could you tell me about your experiences?
- 6) When you are having an academic issue, what do you usually do about that? Do you ask another person for advice? If yes, who and why?
- 7) What kinds of social networks do you get involved in the U. S.? Religious groups, clubs, extracurricular activities? Tell me about your experiences of social networks.
- 8) Do you think that you are doing well in school both academically and socially? Could you tell me about your school life?

Questions regarding cultural consequences

- 1) How much did you know about American culture when you were in Korea? Tell me your thoughts about American culture.
- 2) What are similarities and differences between Korean and American culture?
- 3) Have you enjoyed American cultural products (TV, Internet, movie, music, and so on) when you were in Korea?
- 4) Do you enjoy watching sports in the U. S.? What teams or athletes do you support? How do you feel?
- 5) Do you think you are somehow Americanized now? Tell me about how your everyday behaviors have changed,
- 6) Do you feel strange when you visit Korea during vacations? Tell me about your everyday life when you visit Korea.
- 7) What is most difficult about of living in the U. S.? Please share your stories.

Questions regarding identity

- 1) Tell me your opinion on English as a second official language in Korea
- 2) In a state of emergency in Korea, which one is more important for you, between your nation and yourself?
- 3) What is your most important reason for studying in the U. S.?

- 4) What is the meaning of Korea and Korean people for you?
- 5) Are Korean Americans Korean or American?
- 6) In case of an international soccer match between the U. S. and North Korea, which would you usually support?
- 7) Do you want to be an American citizen?
- 8) Where will you ultimately live? Korea or the U.S.? otherwise where in the globe? Tell me why.
- 9) If you have a child, do you want to send him or her to a foreign country (the U. S.)? Tell me why.
- 10) Do you think you need to contribute to your country?
- 11) When are you proud of being Korean?
- 12) Have you ever been annoyed by some issues related to your nationality?
- 13) Have you ever felt national pride or emotional patriotism while watching Korean TV shows or news via the Internet? Tell me about your experiences

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