

## **A Study of the Experiences of Korean International Students Self-care in America**

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### **Abstract**

*This study is qualitative research conducted to understand the health management experience and grasp the essence of the knowledge of international students increasingly experiencing globalization. The study method was a phenomenological study, and the participants were 6 Korean students residing in America. They voluntarily agreed to participate in in-depth interviews. The data collected from September to November 2017 were analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological methodology. It derived seven theme clusters, 19 themes, and 63 formulated meanings. The experience of Korean international students residing in America is based on the following criteria: 'Focusing more on dietary life,' 'Maintaining habits good for health,' 'Trying to prepare for any possible events,' 'Taking a rest mind and body,' 'Maintaining helpful relationships with people,' 'To strive for the better future,' 'Taking care of myself on my own.' A systematic health education program needs to be provided to achieve the academic goals of international students and ensure a healthy life while studying abroad.*

**Keywords:** *Korean, International, Student, Self-care, Experience, Phenomenological, Study*

### **1. Introduction**

The changes resulting from globalization trends are also distinctly found in education. The number of students heading to different countries for academic reasons is increasing gradually. In the US, where most Korean students chose to study, there were 58,663 Korean international students in 2017. The next is China and India in order [1]. More and more international students choose to study in advanced countries, and it can be regarded as an index for improving a country's educational or economic level. Although this can contribute to developing a country with the cultivation of competent persons equipped with global competitiveness, in terms of individual aspects, they get to experience a lot of difficulties, for example, culture shock in a strange environment, language-related communicative or academic problems, stress resulted from that, depression, racial discrimination, or social isolation [2].

International students have negative experiences diversely in physical, mental, and sociocultural aspects, and this threatens each individual's health in general. Also, when they have any health problem, they find it even harder to use institutional devices to solve it. Due to the lack of health-related knowledge and information, sociocultural

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differences, and related knowledge and information, they face even more complex situations in solving health problems [3][4]. Korean undergraduates in the US often feel lonely being away from their families. However, they need help making friends quickly due to language-related communication problems. Their relationship with people around them gets changed, and their physical condition gets even worse day after day, which makes them feel exhausted both mentally and physically. They also need clarification about feeling superior while studying abroad and inferior to the locals. But to solve their health problem, they try to use medical facilities, but they need help to do so. They gradually feel their limitations in adapting to it [5]. Most international students are in the early stage of adulthood. During this period, they should build up their identity, form an intimate relationship with people around them, and become independent, preparing for their occupation and marriage [6]. Many international students put a lot of effort into a strange sociocultural environment to achieve and adapt to their developmental tasks. Humans are whole-rounded beings that can control themselves for their health and behave prudently for the goal of health. To maintain their physical, mental, and social wellbeing, they regulate themselves about the surrounding environment and perform activities correspondingly to it [7]. Negative experiences accompanying that process work as factors threatening each individual's health. Although the number of students heading to different countries to study is increasing daily, our society needs to pay more attention to their health. Therefore, it is necessary to research how international students manage their health and maintain their academic and everyday lives. This study is intended to investigate the adulthood experiences of Korean international students residing in America regarding how they take care of themselves to be in good health.

## **2. Study method**

### **2.1. Study design**

This is a phenomenological study on what experiences Korean international students residing in the US get to have while taking care of them.

### **2.2. The selection of subjects & ethical consideration**

The subjects of this study are Korean international students studying at universities located in N City and C City in the east of the US who agreed to participate in this research. They are two undergraduates and seven masters and doctors. Four are female, and five are male. Their age ranges from 25 to 36. They have studied in America for 1.5 to 8 years. For ethical consideration over the participants, this researcher provided them with a written agreement dealing with the purpose and method of this study, the procedure of participation and process, guaranteeing of anonymity and confidentiality, the right to quit participating in it, and the disuse of research material, and it was explained orally as well. Only those who fully understood the contents and voluntarily agreed to participate were asked to complete the written agreement.

### **2.3. Data collection**

The data of this study were collected from September up to November 2017. Thanks to the introduction of international students or this author's acquaintances, the subjects

were collected, and appointments were made on the phone in advance. As a place for interviews, this researcher's lab or house was chosen as a quiet place without interference with the interviews. Questions used were structuralized, and according to how the interviews were going, additional questions were asked, too. To eliminate any awkwardness in the first gathering, we talked about ordinary things in the beginning. The interview began with a question: 'Regarding your health while you are studying abroad, what have you experienced, and how have you been taking care of your health?' The interview was done once for every participant. The interview lasted from about 50 minutes to 1 hour and 20 minutes. All the interviews were recorded, and the researcher immediately transcribed the interviews. This author compared what was recorded and transcribed repeatedly to enhance accuracy.

### 2.4. Data analysis

This is a phenomenological study applying Colaizzi's methodology [8]. After reading the transcripts repeatedly, this author sorted out the statements related to the research topic and drew meanings from them with her own words. The meanings derived subthemes and themes and were again combined to draw theme clusters. According to the themes drawn this way, this author described the essential structure of those participants' experiences.

### 3. Result

According to the results of this study, the self-caring experiences of Korean international students residing in the US can be categorized into 63 meanings, 19 themes, and seven theme clusters [Table 1]. Seven theme clusters drawn through 19 themes are found to be 'focusing more on dietary life,' 'trying to maintain habits good for health,' 'trying to prepare for any possible events,' 'taking a rest mentally and physically,' 'maintaining desirable interpersonal relationships,' 'struggling for the better future,' and 'taking care of myself on my own.'

Table 1. The theme clusters of Korean international student's self-care experience

| Formulated Meaning   | Theme                                    | Theme Cluster                      |
|--|--|------------------------------------|
| I eat cooked rice as my main food<br>I eat Korean food when I am sick<br>I go to the Korean food store regularly   | I eat mostly Korean food                 | Focusing more on dietary life      |
| I am seriously consider how to cook<br>I look for information about cooking<br>I try not to eat out  | I cook by myself                         |                                    |
| I buy organic food<br>I buy water to drink   | I try to eat good quality food           |                                    |
| I try to eat vegetables and fruits more<br>I try to eat less salt, sugar, or fatless<br>I consider calories when choosing food<br>I try to avoid processed goods | I consider the nutritional value of food |                                    |
| I walk as much as possible<br>I am in a sports club<br>I exercise regularly<br>I have a habit of doing simple exercises indoors                                  | I always try to exercise                 | Maintaining habits good for health |
| I am sensitive to health information<br>I have found my wrong eating habits  | I have kept an interest in health        |                                    |

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|---|--|--|
| I have quit smoking<br>I have reduced the amount and frequency of drinking  | I have quit harmful habits                     |  |
| I take a health examination regularly<br>I eat health supplement food<br>I take medicine even for minor symptoms  | I try not to catch any disease                 | Trying to prepare for a health problem that might happen |
| I have someone that I can contact when I am sick<br>I talk with my family in Korea every day<br>I use IT technology<br>I have plenty of household medicine<br>I go to the dispensary whenever I feel sick | I find ways to cope with my sickness           |  |
| I try to breathe in clean air<br>I enjoy my life in America with ease<br>I enjoy the sunlight and air as much as I want   | I enjoy the environment suitable for my health | Taking a rest mind and body                              |
| I watch Korean TV programs<br>I have hobbies and specialties<br>I go for a walk<br>I enjoy meditation   | I try to have some free time                   |  |
| I go to sleep when I have time<br>I don't do anything<br>I try to sleep regularly   | I take a rest by sleeping                      |  |
| I intend to get married for security<br>I am with my spouse<br>I lead a religious life  | I try to seek composure in my mind             |  |
| I try not to meet Koreans<br>I try to protect my privacy<br>I am cautious about meeting people<br>I maintain some distance from others  | I try not to waste my feelings unnecessarily   | Maintaining helpful relationships with people            |
| I get along with Korean international students<br>International students and I console each other   | I gain power from people                       |  |
| I go to the church for the locals<br>I joined the club for American students<br>I try to look into the place where I live<br>I let people know of me aggressively   | I try to go into the natives                   | To strive for a better future                            |
| I am focused on studying solely<br>I do my best in my duties<br>I plan a busy day<br>I urge myself not to be loosened<br>I suppress other needs   | I try to reach my goal                         |  |
| I go to the healthcare center<br>I get a check-up at the clinic<br>I take medicine I buy at the drugstore   | I seek specialized help                        | Taking care of myself on my own                          |
| I try to keep myself warm<br>I drink warm water<br>I take a rest at home<br>I eat nutritiously  | I use the knowledge of health I already known  |  |

The first theme cluster focuses more on dietary life, which consists of the following: I eat mostly Korean food, I cook myself, I consider nutrients, and I try to eat quality food. The second theme cluster of 'trying to maintain habits good for health' is composed of the following: I try to exercise, have a keen interest in health, and have quit drinking and smoking. The third theme cluster of 'trying to prepare for any possible events' consists of the following: I try not to catch any disease and find ways to cope with my sickness. The fourth theme cluster of 'taking a rest mentally and physically' is composed of the following: I enjoy the environment suitable for my health, I try to have some free time, I take a rest by sleeping, and I try to seek composure in mind. The fifth theme cluster of 'maintaining desirable interpersonal relationships' consists of the

following: I try not to consume my feelings unnecessarily, and I gain power from people. The sixth theme cluster of 'striving for a better future' comprises the following: I try to enter the US society and struggle for the goal. Lastly, the seventh theme cluster of 'taking care of myself on my own' consists of the following: I seek specialized aid and use the knowledge of health I already know.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Korean international students in America know that health is essential to attaining and maintaining their goals, so they should try not to catch any disease. They feel it is necessary to adopt good dietary habits, which they could not have realized before. Also, they try to have habits that are good for their health, for instance, exercising or quitting drinking and smoking. They have become more interested in health and sensitive about related information, although they ignored it much before. To cope with any situation in which they are sick, they prepare household medicine. They try to eat health supplement food eagerly as well. Despite their busy schedule for studying, they try to take a rest to gain physical as well as mental comfort. They enjoy their hobbies and specialties when they have free time. To avoid consuming their emotion in the narrow world of international students unnecessarily, they try to distance themselves from other Korean international students. But getting along with people relieves their stress and gives them power as well. To overcome the language barriers and cultural differences and attain their goals, they try to exchange with the locals positively. They also strive to recall what they had in their mind initially. In the process, if they have any health problem, they seek specialized aid or take care of themselves based on the rules of health they know.

In the process, it was shown that the thoughts and efforts to maintain their health. In particular, most of them thought they could prevent disease in health care, keep their diet in the culture they grew up in, and promote their health through regular and steady exercise. In this study, Korean international students could understand how they are doing their self-care. However, there is no systematic and concrete knowledge of this, and accurate information about the medical system needs to be improved. Therefore, a systematic health education program needs to be provided for international students' academic achievement and a healthy life while studying abroad.

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