

# “I Don’t Want to Feel Like a Stranger”: Korean Students Who Play Basketball Seriously

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this study was to investigate the experience of playing basketball among Korean students residing in a small campus town in the U.S. A total of seven Korean students in a midwestern university were interviewed. From the analysis of the interviews, three themes emerged that described the basketball experiences of Korean students: (a) the cost and benefits of playing basketball, (b) the internal factors that facilitated playing basketball, and (c) the external factors that facilitated playing basketball. The findings suggest that the strategies Korean students used to cope with adjustment issues were related to seriously participating in basketball. Participants in this study possessed the qualities of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1992). Their cultural background influenced the formation of leisure participation, and more intimate in-group relationships were established through their leisure activities.

**Keywords.** basketball, serious leisure, Korean culture

**Résumé.** Le but de cette enquête était d’étudier l’expérience de jouer au basket-ball parmi les étudiants coréens résidant dans une petite ville de campus universitaire américain. Un total de sept étudiants coréens en étude à une université au centre des États-Unis ont été interviewés. Trois thèmes décrivant les expériences de basket-ball par les étudiants coréens sont apparus : (a) les coûts et les avantages de jouer au basket-ball, (b) les facteurs internes facilitant le basket-ball, et (c) les facteurs externes facilitant le basket-ball. Les résultats suggèrent que pour faire face aux issues d’ajustement, les étudiants coréens perçoivent le basket-ball comme loisir sérieux (Stebbins, 1992). En conclusion des rapports plus intimes dans ce group culturel ont été établis par leurs activités de loisirs, il semble donc que le milieu socioculturel influence la formation et la participation aux loisirs.

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**Mots-clefs.** basket-ball, loisir sérieux, culture coréenne

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More than 580,000 international students are studying in the U.S. (Hamilton, 2003), and the globalization process will bring even more international students to the U.S. According to a technical report (IIE Network, 2004), almost 57% of the international students in the U.S. are from Asian countries. Among students from Asia, those from India, China, and Korea make up a large proportion of the total U.S. international student population. While the general enrollment number from several countries has decreased recently, the number of students from Korea has remained fairly constant. Enrollment of Korean students in the U.S. exceeds 52,000 (IIE Network, 2004).

A number of studies indicate that international students hold different behavioural expectations than U.S. students. Some behaviours culturally acceptable in their home countries are not so in the U.S (Yook & Albert, 1998). Particularly in the early stages of adjustment in the U.S., international students often experience a significant amount of distress due to the uncertainty related to cultural norms (Chng, Ding, & Perez, 1998) and the language barrier (Volet & Tan-Quigley, 1999). According to Barrett and Huba (1994), Asian international students experience a lesser degree of satisfaction with campus life than students from Europe and Latin America. These scholars also noted positive relationships between perceived English language skills and interest in building relationships with Americans.

Some negative stereotypes assigned to international students not only cause mental stress, but also place barriers to adjusting to college life in the U.S. According to Lee (as cited in Kim & Yeh, 2003), Asian students are often perceived as overachievers, nerdy, and uninterested in fun. Although several positive stereotypes abound, such as being good at math and science or having high GPAs, numerous others are negative in nature. For example, Asian students are often viewed as submissive, humble, passive, obedient, quiet, having a tendency to stay within their own race, and unwilling to mesh with the American culture (Lin & Yi, 1997). These negative stereotypes often bring stress to Asian students, and thus may influence the participation of Asian students in campus life, including recreation activity.

Some studies identified coping strategies so that international students make good adjustments to the U.S. culture, and experience well-being and success. Tseng and Newton (2002) offered the following coping strate-

gies: (a) making friends and building relationships, (b) asking for help handling problems, (c) establishing cultural and social contacts, and (d) building good relationships with faculty members. Other researchers (e.g., Abel, 2002; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Tseng & Newton, 2002) also suggested (a) building wider social networks, (b) establishing cultural and social contacts, (c) becoming proficient in English, and (d) planning time for participation in leisure activities.

Among the various strategies, several studies demonstrated an empirical association between the international students' leisure participation and their level of satisfaction (Bhugra, Bhui, Mallett, Desai, Singh, & Leff, 2000; Locke, 1988; Surdam, 1980). In leisure studies, Coleman and Iso-Ahola (1993) reported that leisure activity buffers stress through social support and self-determination. Iwasaki (2003) also reported that coping strategies involving leisure activity are linked to stress reduction. It seems that leisure participation, whether carried out casually or seriously, contributes to reducing stress levels and improving the quality of life of international students.

While there are various forms of leisure participation, serious leisure is one form that characterizes the systematic pursuit of amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that is substantial and interesting for the participants involved in such leisure activities (Stebbins, 1992). Stebbins identified the six defining characteristics of serious leisure: (a) perseverance, (b) significant effort, (c) career development, (d) durable benefits, (e) strong identification, and (f) unique ethos. Various benefits are associated with serious leisure. Personal benefits include self-actualization, self-expression, self-image, self-gratification, regeneration, personal enrichment, and financial returns. On the other hand, social attraction, group accomplishment, and development of an emerging group are some social benefits (Stebbins, 2004).

Over the last two decades, serious leisure as a research topic has been widely examined, and since 1990, a large amount of research studies have been conducted in sports and games (Stebbins, 2001). In addition, serious leisure has been examined through a variety of leisure activities including art and science (Stebbins, 2001), fishing (Yoder, 1997), lifelong learning (Jones & Symon, 2001), firefighting (Yarnal & Dowler, 2002), and stamp collecting (Gelber, 1992). Over the last 10 years, serious leisure has been examined by numerous researchers using populations such as older golfers (Siegenthaler & O'Dell, 2003), people with disabilities (Patterson, 2000), runners (Major, 2001), master swimmers (Hastings, Kurth, Schloder, & Cyr, 1995), and football fans (Gibson, Will-

ming, & Holdnak, 2002). However, the body of knowledge associated with serious leisure has been built by researchers who have employed individuals in Western cultures where individualism is a distinct cultural paradigm (Choi, 2002). Perhaps examining serious leisure using populations possessing non-individualism might expand the understanding of serious leisure.

A very important cultural distinction is that between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. The concept of individualism and collectivism (I-C) has been discussed by a number of cross-cultural researchers, and the contrast between the two has been well documented (c.f., Oyserman & Kimmelmeier, 2002). I-C as important cultural dimensions refers to varying degrees of separateness and connectedness of both individuals and groups (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Oyserman & Kimmelmeier; Triandis, 1995). According to Triandis, I-C is described as follows:

A preliminary definition of individualism is a social pattern that consists of loosely linked individuals who view themselves as independent of collectives; are primarily motivated by their own preferences, needs, rights, and the contracts they have established with others; give priority to their personal goals over the goals of others; and emphasize rational analyses of the advantages and disadvantages to associating with others. Collectivism may be initially defined as a social pattern consisting of closely linked individuals who see themselves as parts of one or more collectives (family, co-workers, tribe, nation); are primarily motivated by the norms of, and duties imposed by, those collectives; are willing to give priority to the goals of these collectives over their own personal goals; and emphasize their connectedness to members of these collectives. (p. 2)

Thus those people on the individualism conceive themselves as being separate, autonomous, and distinct from others. Their orientation is toward self and internal attributes. However, collectivism refers to a perception of self that is embedded within social relationships. The personal self is de-emphasized, with an orientation toward others and the welfare of a group or community (Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Therefore, individualist cultures tend to emphasize independence and individual initiative (Kim, Triandis, Kagitcibasi, Choi, & Yoon, 1994), while collectivist cultures have a tendency to underscore collective identity and group solidarity (Kim et al., 1994). According to Asai and Lucca (1988), the individualist culture is denoted by being "good at forming new in-group," is task oriented, and values independence. In a collectivist culture, people tend to co-operate with in-group members, and an intensive relationship is present with the in-

group. The in-group and out-group distinction is clear in a collectivistic culture, because people often have few in-groups, often placing everyone else in the out-group. However, in an individualistic culture, people tend to form many in-groups, and their distinction between in-group and out-group members is less clear than that of collectivists (Asai & Lucca).

In order to assess individualism and collectivism, Hofstede (1980) developed a now widely used instrument. Based on the findings used by this measurement instrument, Asians tend to score high on collectivism, and individuals in Western cultures, especially North Americans, have a tendency to score high on individualism (Verma & Triandis, 1999). In general, Americans approach interaction from an individualistic perspective, while students from East Asian countries tend to view interaction from a collectivist standpoint (Bond, Leung & Wan, 1982). According to a study by Lee and Green (1991), East Asian students tend to comply with group norms regardless of their private views. Koreans scored very high on collectivism and scored very low on individualism (Gudykunst, Yoon, & Nishida, 1987), and Hofstede (2001) also found that Koreans are likely to demonstrate collectivism whereas Americans are prone to show individualistic aspects. In a study of Korean culture, Cha (1994) found that family and school are important in-groups in Korean society, thus confirming that a collectivistic perspective is prevalent in traditional Korean culture.

In addition to the collectivistic nature of Korean students, the Korean educational system has influenced leisure participation among its students. Korean students generally experience a stressful school atmosphere during their high school years undergoing high levels of pressure to succeed on extremely competitive college entrance exams. As a result, leisure participation during the high school years is very limited. When high school students enter college, they consider their academic institutions as places for pursuing academic achievement, and attempt to establish social relationships with others (Lee, Kang, & Yum, 2005).

Several researchers have examined leisure behaviours of Korean college students. Park (1999) reported social interaction and participation in recreational sports as significant factors that influence life satisfaction of Korean students. In another study, Park (2005) also empirically demonstrated that participation in recreational sports is associated with enhanced body image as well as self-esteem. Some Korean researchers (Lee, Kim, & Song, 2005b) also examined the leisure experience of Korean female college students who participated in boxing. They reported

that although perseverance was apparent among those students, they attained benefits such as self-actualization and social bonding from their participation in boxing. Another study by Lee, Kim, and Song (2005a) investigated female college students in a Taekwondo club. Similar to other study, they found self-actualization and companionship as some important benefits from their participation in Taekwondo.

### ***Purpose Statement***

Taken together, this study examines the serious leisure of Korean college students who study in the U.S. While numerous leisure researchers (e.g., Juniu, 2000; Stodolska & Alexandris, 2004; Stodolska & Yi, 2003) have examined leisure behaviours employing ethnic minorities, very few attempts have been made to investigate leisure using individuals who have a collectivistic cultural view as research participants. As previous studies demonstrated, Korean culture distinctively reflects collectivism, and thus, an examination of the serious leisure of Korean students residing in the U.S. may add new insight into the body of knowledge related to serious leisure. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand the experience of playing basketball among Korean students residing on a small campus town in the U.S. In this study, the researchers selected basketball as a form of serious leisure.

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants***

A purposive sampling strategy was used for this study. Participants must have (a) lived in the U.S. at least for a year, (b) played basketball more than 10 years and was currently playing in a club, and (c) identified basketball as the primary leisure pursuit, and (d) identified basketball as a self-defining activity. Seven male Korean students were recruited for the study (see Table 1). At the time of the study, all participants belonged to the same club. Although the club had more than seven people, some were excluded because they did not meet the predetermined criteria. For example, some placed a higher priority on a leisure activity other than playing basketball. Some students who held American citizenship were also excluded. At the time of the study, several other basketball clubs included Korean students, but the investigators did not intentionally recruit participants from other clubs because they were multinational. The investigators did not wish to consider different cultural factors. Since all participants were able to speak Korean and the interviewer's (the first author) primary language was Korean, each interview was conducted in Korean.

**Table 1**  
**Study Participants**

Pseudonyms	Academic Status	Years of Playing Basketball	Years Lived In the U.S.
Choi	Graduate	16	5
Ahn	Undergraduate	11	1
Han	Undergraduate	10	4
Park	Graduate	14	4
Lee	Graduate	17	2
Kim	Undergraduate	12	3
Chang	Undergraduate	11	3

### ***Data Collection Procedures***

Seven in-depth interviews were conducted to collect data for this study. A series of open-ended questions using the interview guide (see Table 2) were used to explore participants' adjustment process, campus recreation, and their involvement in basketball. The interviews were semi-structured, and whenever responses were deemed to be insufficient or vague, the first author probed for more explanation. Information about the participants' backgrounds, leisure experience, and social life in the U.S. were elicited through the questions.

**Table 2**  
**Sample Interview Questions**

1. What are the difficulties you face as an international student?
2. How do your leisure activities help you adjusting to the life here?
3. What are the changes of your leisure activities after coming to the U.S.?
4. How much time and effort do you put in playing basketball?
5. Have you thought about meaning of playing basketball? Is it different from playing in your hometown?
6. What are the difficulties that you face as you play basketball here?
7. What are the benefits that you get from participating in this sport?
8. How important is it to play basketball in terms of forming your identity (who you are)?

Each interview was conducted one-on-one. The interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed by the first author. Participants had the option to use their language of preference during the interviews. The in-

investigator took field notes in order to record thoughts that emerged during the interviews. The data were coded and then analyzed using the constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998). Through the constant comparison method, the investigators sought the emerging conceptual categories from the first interview, and compared each piece of data in order to explore and explicate the themes. During data analyses, the investigators were able to find patterns among ideas, and the data were coded into several categories (e.g., difficulties experienced as international students, cost of participating in serious leisure, benefits of participating in serious leisure).

In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the study, the investigators conducted member checks by asking participants to review their transcripts to verify data accuracy. Member check is a process that ensures the transcript accurately reflects interviewees' narratives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During the member check process, participants were also asked to elaborate on issues brought up in the interviews that seemed to be important. Peer debriefing is the process of reviewing the research procedure and data with someone familiar with the research issues being investigated (Lincoln & Guba). For peer debriefing, the investigator had meetings with a staff member at the Office of International Services. This individual was working in higher education, and was knowledgeable of qualitative methods. Since this staff member was familiar with international student issues, the investigators were able to ensure that methodologies were adequate and the interview questions to the point.

## **Findings**

Three central themes that describe the basketball experiences by Korean students emerged from the data. They include: (a) cost and benefits of playing basketball, (b) internal factors that facilitate playing basketball, and (c) external factors that facilitate playing basketball. Subthemes also emerged to describe each theme. Various costs and benefits of participation provide defining aspects that characterize Korean students' experience in playing basketball seriously. In addition, internal factors (i.e., financial difficulty, language barrier, loneliness) that can be considered negative emerged as facilitating participation in basketball for these Korean students. Furthermore, external factors (i.e., small town lifestyle, better facilities and better access, local culture) were identified as additional factors that facilitate playing basketball.

### ***Costs and Benefits of Playing Basketball***

The Korean students interviewed in this study participated in basketball very seriously. Their experiences associated with basketball contained var-

ious costs as well as benefits. When these Korean students reported their experience with playing basketball, they identified some distinctive experiential characteristics that included associated costs and benefits.

### *Costs*

All participants in this study expressed costs associated with playing basketball. It was clear that the experience of injury and overcoming physical toughness at the court were the prevailing factors through which participants had to persevere. Two participants expressed the need to persevere through injury, as well as an anxiety level more desperate than the others. Park, a graduate student in his early 30s, remarked:

I had a couple of surgeries on my knee back when I was in college, and the doctor told me that I really need to take care of my knees. But I remember going back to the basketball court as soon as I recovered, and I still have severe pains whenever I play these days. Sometimes I can hardly walk after playing, but I keep on doing this because there is something else I get out of playing.

For Park, his need to persevere was not just towards overcoming his injuries. As an international student, he also had to cope with a limited social network due to investing a significant amount of time and effort in playing basketball. According to Park, the people he knew through playing basketball formed between 80 and 90% of his personal relationships in the U.S. He believed that the members at the club, and others at the basketball court, were the starting point for his meaningful relationships. However, he pointed out the reverse side of this relationship:

As an international student, I think it is also important to meet people from the mainstream as well as the ones from other countries. But as you know, most of the people I hang out with are from Korea, and it has not changed over the last three years. I thought I was expanding my circle of friends through basketball, but on the other hand, I have been shrinking socialization opportunities with non-Koreans.

Park's point was consistent with one of the strategies that international students could use to succeed in a host country. According to Spencer (2003), securing opportunities for cultural exchange is crucial for international students' adjustment.

Lacking interaction with the host culture could result in misunderstandings in many venues, as is well demonstrated by another participant. Choi is also a graduate student who has experienced many conflicts during basketball.

Dealing with excessive competitiveness was also identified as a cost. Choi described how he and others have been involved in physical con-

flict a number of times when playing basketball as games became tougher and more serious when facing an unanticipated loss. Other participants also agreed that games played in the U.S. seem more intense and competitive. Lee commented, "I sometimes feel scared when I am under the basket because I find hands coming toward my face, not toward the ball." Most participants seemed to be concerned with excessive competitiveness because of the possibility of injury or physical aggressiveness during the game. Their previous experiences playing basketball may not have been as intense as in the U.S., but competition with different teams that were perceived to be more aggressive appeared to be a cost needing to be overcome.

### *Benefits*

As participants enumerated their frustrations, anxiety, and other costs of playing basketball, the investigator questioned whether they still wanted to continue, in spite of such difficulty. The answer was "Yes" for all participants, but the reasons varied. Participants' rationale included "escape from loneliness," "being addicted to playing," "social network," "physical fitness," "enhanced self-image," and "pure fun." The interviewees clearly identified durable benefits such as self-enrichment, social belonging, and enhancement of self-image. Many agreed that social belonging and interaction with peers were the important benefits of playing basketball.

Han, an undergraduate student, illustrated that when he first came to the U.S. several years previously, he did not know anybody in town. He felt that he was not being welcomed, and loneliness seemed to be distracting his studies.

I remember first day I went to play basketball with a group of people from my country. I didn't know anybody in the group, of course. But I believe I was among the best players in the group. Actually I was quite confident playing. Since then, I was often invited by these people. If I didn't possess the basketball skill, I would have been left out and still be trying to find people to hang out with. I wonder if I could ever be treated like this else anywhere but church.

Han's self-image was enhanced through playing basketball, and he was also able to make some good friends. Similarly, Chang, also an undergraduate student, acknowledged that his playing basketball meant something more than having fun or keeping in shape. He also considered playing basketball as a way to build meaningful relationships with others:

As an international student, I think chances to interact with people from different countries are pretty low. As a consequence, I see myself more and more involved in playing with Korean people as I make close friends there. Without those people, I can't imagine living here by myself.

Chang's comment shows that international students could participate in basketball with a clear purpose. When he felt alienated from the mainstream culture, he tried to increase his involvement in basketball, thus utilizing basketball to help him better adjust to his new environment.

Improved self-confidence was identified as a benefit for some participants. Ahn, for example, stated that he feared interacting with people from different countries. His timidity was mostly due to the language barrier:

When I first came, I was kind of scared to speak up in class or else where, because I knew my English wasn't good enough. But there was a turning point that I gained confidence, and I believe it was after I played against other people many times in basketball. There were times that I beat other people, and I thought if I could do better than them in this, why should I be scared?

Thus, even though Ahn was more interested in playing with people from his country, playing against people from different countries contributed to developing his self-confidence.

These Korean students also related basketball to their identity. Lee indicated that his major interest in life is playing basketball: "When there is game, I get so anxious that I can't even sleep the day before the game. I think of the game plans in bed. This won't happen to me at all before an exam. I can stake my life on basketball." Besides having an identity as a basketball player, other identities attached to these students included "international students," "Sunday school teacher" at church, "part-time workers," and "instructors." However, an identity as "a basketball player" was reported to be the most important identity followed by that of "an international student." The interviewer also asked how an identity as a basketball player changed after coming to the U.S. Responses to this question ranged from "somewhat increased" to "significantly increased." It was obvious that identity as a basketball player had become more important than that of "an international student."

### ***Internal Factors that Facilitate Playing Basketball Seriously***

Korean students interviewed in this study reported that they experienced various difficulties living in the U.S. which often caused stress in their lives. They identified the difficulties associated with (a) limited finances,

(b) the language barrier, and (c) loneliness due to limited social opportunities. However, these difficulties both directly and indirectly influenced their participation in basketball. In other words, these stressors often became facilitators for engaging in basketball.

### *Financial Difficulty*

Relying on parents for financial support appeared as an important stressor for the interviewees. As shown in Table 1, four participants were enrolled in undergraduate programs, and three participants were graduate students. All the undergraduate students were financially supported by their parents, and two graduate students received financial aid from the school. All had financial concerns. Since the participants ranged in age from mid 20s to mid 30s, they seemed to feel guilty about asking parents to support their education. Han, an undergraduate, stated that he should have been “financially independent” if in Korea, because people do not ask their parents for money after spending two years in the military. Most participants in this study went through the Korean mandatory two-year military service. Within the Korean culture, there is a notion that once people get out of the military, they are considered adults and are expected to make money themselves instead of depending on their parents.

According to Han, his inability to support himself financially was a key factor that led to playing basketball. Even though he enjoyed playing basketball prior to coming to the U.S., his involvement in this activity significantly increased because it did not cost anything for him to play. Another student, Park, also added:

If I had more money, I might have engaged in some other leisure activities as well. Since playing basketball here does not cost anything, I will continue playing until I get old. That’s how I was in Korea, and I knew I would end up playing basketball when I came here.

### *Language Barrier*

Most students interviewed identified a language barrier as one of the defining aspects of their daily life in the U.S. Kim, an undergraduate student, described his experience:

There is no doubt that most international students will have difficulties of language. When I thought that I have difficulties in socialization with American people, I think the source of this difficulty is language. You know, if you don’t speak English well, I think it’s like having a disability, and consequently it leads you to becoming less confident in every aspect. This consequently makes me get along with Korean people, and I know

that my English will not get better. I know this is wrong, but I don't want to feel like a stranger surrounded by people with different minds.

While Korean students identified difficulty communicating in English as an important barrier to seeking social engagement with American students, they pointed out that the barrier often facilitated their seeking relationships with other Korean students, causing their English fluency to worsen. For example, Kim expressed hope that he would become fluent in English and have more opportunities for getting along with Americans, regardless of his personality. While Kim seemed quite reserved, he ascribed his limited social life to a lack of English fluency.

### *Loneliness*

Park, a graduate student, suggested that feeling lonely was the most difficult for him. Park noted that he started playing basketball to "defeat loneliness." As these Korean students faced difficulties in adjusting to the new environment, participating in basketball became a solution for them with positive value to foreigners. Another participant identified interaction with peers as the most important reason for the activity. According to Kim, playing basketball on the weekends with other Korean students was the only opportunity to enjoy a leisure activity since he was usually busy during the week. Playing basketball was important for him because he could meet close friends at the basketball court and it was in fact his only socialization opportunity.

### ***External Factors That Facilitate Playing Basketball Seriously***

Korean students interviewed in this study identified various environmental as well as cultural factors that influenced their participation in basketball. These factors were formed through social networks or physical environments that were external to individuals (Henderson & Estes, 2002; Raymore, 2002). In general, all these external factors played positive roles in playing basketball after coming to the U.S.

### *Small Town Lifestyle*

According to the participants, living in a small town influenced participation. Most participants came from urban areas in Korea, and indicated that there were limited opportunities for entertainment in a small town compared to their local of origin. Participating in campus recreation was also an important leisure activity in Korea, but they tend to invest more time in playing basketball in the U.S. because they perceived limited leisure opportunities in a small town.

While playing basketball itself was important, these students identified that “who they play with” was more important than “what they do.” They placed more value on people than on the activity itself. Park, for example, illustrated how living in a rural area influenced his leisure experience:

My leisure is different here, of course. I think living in the U.S. is not the only factor that makes the difference. Living in a rural area makes a big difference. I’m from a city that has more than 11 million people, and I find almost nothing to do in this town. My leisure might have been a little bit different if I was in Chicago or LA. Although I usually spend most of time playing basketball, I also enjoy playing computer games. If I was in my hometown, I might not be spending my weekends just playing basketball.

In a similar vein, Chang, an undergraduate student, indicated that he was unable to find many things to do, and naturally ended up playing basketball:

I guess my leisure pattern should be a little different if I was in Korea. Before I came to the U.S., I always played sports, especially basketball, whenever I was with friends... Back in Korea, after playing basketball we would go to a bar to get some beer, and I do the same thing here. I could say that the difference is how much I drink here. When I go to drink alcohol in Korea, I can always take the bus or subway to go home, but here I always have to drive and so I tend not to drink too much.

### *Better Facilities and Better Access*

The Korean students interviewed agreed that their level of participation in playing basketball was higher than that in their home country. The recreational sport centre at the study site is known as one of the best fitness centres in the U.S., and all the interviewees were impressed by its quality, identified as the most important motivator. With regard to the university recreation facility, Han mentioned: “Playing basketball in the Rec centre here is really nice. I never expected to play in a nice gymnasium like here, and I think I will miss this place when I have to go back to Korea.” Chang also made a similar comment: “Since we have a really nice gymnasium and not many places to go around here, I get to play much more than before.”

### *Local Culture*

The research site has a somewhat distinct basketball culture. Among various athletic events on campus, the university’s basketball games are easily the most popular and help to define the local culture (DiPrimio & Notter, 1995; Lemberger, 1990). Some interviewees indicated that the

local basketball culture influenced their interest in and participation in basketball. Lee, for example, explained his experience of local basketball culture:

When a basketball season begins, I really enjoy watching basketball games on TV, and after I see some player's impressive move, I can't wait to go to the court to imitate it. When the season begins, we can watch people on TV almost every day. Since they have so many teams, there are usually much more games shown on TV than I can manage to watch. I also watch people at the gym, and some good players there really instigate me. It might sound funny that I try to imitate them, but what I mean is I get to learn some stuff that enhances my skills.

The interviewee above had more exposure to basketball through the media after coming to the U.S., which turned out to be an influential factor in facilitating his participation.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study revealed various experiential characteristics associated with playing basketball by Korean students who resided on a small campus town in the U.S. It is important to qualify that one of the main themes, the cost and benefits of playing basketball, is consistent with Stebbins' studies in serious leisure. This study found that Korean students reported perseverance related to pain, a limited social networks, and excessive competitiveness. Among some of the distinctive characteristics of serious leisure identified by Stebbins (1992), the perseverance to deal with anxiety, fatigue, injury, or embarrassment particularly relates to the cost of serious leisure reported by Stebbins (2001b). When individuals pursue serious leisure, Stebbins (2001b) noted that people overcome various costs with the expectation of positive results related to the activities. The Korean students who play basketball demonstrate their perseverance in successfully carrying out the activity.

The participants in this study also reported various benefits (e.g., escape from loneliness, social interaction, improved self-image) associated with playing basketball. Among Stebbins' (1992) eight durable benefits associated with serious leisure, playing basketball allowed Korean students to experience self-enrichment, social belonging, and enhancement of self-image. Many agreed that social belonging and interaction were central to their playing, and were discovered to be the most important benefits they sought.

The findings associated with the perceived benefits of Korean students in this study are also consistent with the benefits documented by Driver and Burns (1999). Driver and Burns identified socio-cultural experi-

ences such as social bonding, cohesion, and co-operation as important benefits categories. In this study, Korean students experienced social support, opportunity for socialization, and acculturation through their leisure activities.

Considering the various conceptual similarities between Korean students' experience of basketball and serious leisure, participants in this study are identified as possessing the qualities of serious leisure. As demonstrated in the findings, playing basketball was an important vehicle in building social networks with other Korean students on campus. Participants were closely bonded to other Korean students through basketball, but become more isolated from the host culture. In addition, participants in this study reported the importance of personal identity as basketball players. As Stebbins (1997) indicated, people involved in serious leisure develop a unique ethos or subculture around the activity, and they also create a distinctive social world through the activity. For the participants in this study, their identity as basketball players was important because they could make this importance known to others.

Participants in this study sought out opportunities to become involved in basketball because it enhanced their sense of self. Playing basketball was an important part of who they were, and they often discussed their plays outside the basketball court. As noted in Laverie's (1998) study, highly involved individuals compare themselves to others who are similar or superior, and Korean students in this study also compared themselves with peers or other authority figures. Their level of involvement was so high that one of the participants mentioned that he would sometimes get "stressed out" or frustrated when his play did not meet his own or others' expectations.

Korean students in this study demonstrated that language and cultural barriers are factors that reinforced constraints in recreational settings. In congruence with Yu and Berryman's (1996) study, differences in cultural values, their distinctive physical features, and a language barrier influenced their participation in leisure activities and in fact became hindrances to belonging to Western culture. As Stodolska and Yi-Kook (2005) noted, Korean students' immigration to a new environment generated new constraints in leisure, but there were reduced constraints too because they have experienced some limitations of playing basketball such as limited space or lack of facilities when they were in Korea. Eliminated constraints turned out to be facilitators for participation in leisure activities.

This study also found numerous factors that facilitate playing basketball. It is interesting to note that various difficulties causing stress for Ko-

rean students often became facilitative to playing basketball. While various difficulties reported in this study may be important constraints to participation in leisure activity, these constraints facilitated and strengthened participation in basketball. This study supports the findings of past constraint negotiation research in that constraints do not always prevent or reduce participation (Kay & Jackson, 1991; Livengood & Stodolska, 2004; Scott, 1991; Shaw, Bonen, & McCabe, 1991). As Hubbard and Mannell (2001) demonstrated in their empirical study, the factors that could be barriers for leisure participation became "facilitatory functions."

Perhaps an important contribution of this study to leisure experience in general is the relationships between collectivistic characteristics and the formation of leisure participation. For individuals in this study, participation was heavily associated with social networks. Playing basketball was not only an important outlet for releasing stress but also a way to interact with peers. Loneliness, easy access to better facilities, and the local culture of Korean students influenced group membership toward basketball activity. This study reported that playing basketball was a vehicle for interviewees to experience deeper involvement in their in-group membership, and some participants were able to clearly draw a distinction between the in-group and out-group by showing more intimacy toward members of the same culture (Gudykunst et al., 1987). They were seeking in-group membership through basketball activity, which in turn intensified their in-group membership. As Jones (2000) noted, it is likely that the participants were seeking in-group favouritism in order to compensate the costs associated with their enjoyable activity. In addition, as they encountered norms and behaviours in leisure settings that contradicted that of their country, more intimate in-group relationships were established. As shown in the narratives, some participants indirectly refused to conform to norms by holding on to their ways of playing, leading to playing with people from the same cultural background. According to Gudykunst et al. (1987), uncertainty avoidance refers to the degree which members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations. These researchers indicated that Koreans are high in uncertainty avoidance, whereas Americans are low. Consistent with this view, participants in this study seemed to be anxious about playing under different norms. They declined to accept the uncertain situations (such as having a different criteria of calling fouls or games being more intense than expected) created by the out-group, and their consistent attachment to the in-group culture was upheld.

Despite the interesting results of this study, some limitations must be considered when interpreting the results. First, this study was conducted using Korean students at a large university in a small town in the Midwestern U.S., where the Korean student body is the largest among the international students (approximately 1,000) with the total number of international students at approximately 3,000. Therefore, various environmental, social, and cultural factors may be unique to the study site. Second, all participants in this study originally came from metropolitan areas. Thus, it may be possible that their perceptions of leisure and life in a small town are due to their former metropolitan lifestyles. However, it was believed that the present study suggested important insights into understanding the experiences of international students. This study employed seven Korean students. Increased sample size could have allowed data saturation, which might have provided further insights into the serious leisure.

In this investigation, it was observed that the strategies Korean students used to cope with their adjustment to the U.S are related to their serious participation in basketball. Encouraging international students to develop serious leisure activities might become an effective strategy for overcoming stress. Additional cross-cultural research is needed by including people from different cultures. In future studies, questions of issues with other international student groups or other sojourners could be addressed. Furthermore, future research is needed to investigate the formation of serious leisure in different activities.

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