Article

The Influence of Language and Culture Learning on Students' Perception of Social Issues in South Korea: Insights from Indonesian Learners of Korean

Journal of Asian Social Science Research
2025, Vol. 7, No. 1: 121-148
https://cassr.net/jassr/

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Abstract

This study explores the influence of learning the Korean language and culture on students' perceptions of social issues in South Korea. Drawing on the theory of cultural relativism in language acquisition and intercultural understanding, this quantitative research employed an online survey administered to 28 students enrolled in Korean language courses at Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The participants came from diverse academic backgrounds and demonstrated varying levels of Korean proficiency. Data were analysed using T-tests and linear regression, with interpretation supported by relevant literature. The results indicate a significant positive correlation: students with higher proficiency in Korean language and culture exhibited greater awareness and understanding of South Korean social issues. This suggests that language and cultural education can enhance international awareness and empathy. Despite offering valuable insights, the study has certain limitations, including potential self-reporting bias and its general focus on broad social issues rather than specific topics such as workplace dynamics. Nonetheless, the findings are relevant for language educators, policymakers, and students seeking to deepen their cross-cultural competence.

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Keywords

Language learning, culture, perception, social issues, students, Korean language, South Korea

Introduction

In today's globalized world, advances in communication technology have accelerated intercultural interactions and information exchange, making cross-cultural competence an essential skill for global citizenship. Higher education institutions are increasingly expected to prepare students not only with technical expertise but also with the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Root and Ngampornchai 2013; Lee and Song 2019). Intercultural sensitivity—defined as one's active willingness to understand, appreciate, and accept cultural differences (Chen and Starosta 1998)—is becoming a core component of this global competence.

Language and culture are deeply interconnected. As Kumagai (1994) emphasizes, language learning is inseparable from cultural context, which gives meaning to words and expressions. Learning a foreign language without engaging with its culture limits one's ability to truly communicate and empathize. Tucker and Lambert (1973) further argue that achieving full communicative competence in a second language requires cultural openness and reduced ethnocentrism. Thus, incorporating cultural elements in language instruction not only enhances linguistic skills but also fosters intercultural understanding and tolerance.

South Korea has emerged as a global cultural force through the spread of *hallyu* (the Korean Wave), attracting a growing number of international students eager to learn its language and culture. Among Indonesian students, interest in Korea is high—not just for its entertainment industry but also for academic, professional, and migration opportunities (Latief 2015). However, previous research has shown that Indonesian students often face challenges in intercultural communication due to limited cultural competence,

which can lead to misunderstandings and conflict (Murtiningsih 2016). Understanding Korean society—including its values, norms, and social issues—is thus crucial for students aiming to study, work, or live in Korea.

South Korea's social landscape presents a range of complex issues, including gender inequality, workplace discrimination, and inter-Korean relations. For instance, persistent patriarchal norms have contributed to challenges such as low birth rates, feminist movements, and sexual harassment in the workplace. These issues are widely discussed in both Korean and international media, and understanding them requires more than surface-level knowledge. Students who engage deeply with the Korean language and culture may develop more nuanced and critical perspectives on these societal challenges.

This study investigates whether students with greater exposure to Korean language and culture have different perceptions of South Korean social issues compared to those with limited exposure. By doing so, it contributes to a growing body of research on how language and culture education shape intercultural awareness and empathy. As Moeller and Nugent (2014) explain, true intercultural communicative competence includes not only linguistic proficiency but also the attitudes, values, and cultural insights necessary to engage meaningfully with others.

In the context of increasing partnerships between Indonesia and South Korea—in areas such as business, education, and labour—this research is particularly relevant. Intercultural competence is vital for students preparing to enter the global workforce, especially in multinational companies that operate across cultural borders (Pop and Sim 2022). Educational institutions therefore have a responsibility to integrate language and culture learning that supports students' readiness for global careers (Djafri and Hasanah 2025; Yousef 2024).

This research offers practical implications. For students, it can raise awareness of how language and culture learning shape their

worldviews. For educators, it provides insights for designing more effective intercultural curricula. And for future researchers, it offers a foundation for further exploration into how language education can cultivate cross-cultural understanding and critical engagement with global issues.

Studies on Korean Culture and Students' Perceptions

The increasing global influence of Korean culture, particularly through the Korean Wave has sparked a growing interest among scholars in examining how various groups perceive and respond to this cultural phenomenon. A study by Linggarwati et al (2021), for example, explored how high school students in Purwokerto, Indonesia, perceive the Korean Wave and its implications for regional cultural resilience. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys with interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) involving students, teachers, and cultural stakeholders. The findings revealed that while Korean cultural influence is strong, students still exhibit personal resilience by maintaining local cultural practices, such as language use and family values. Importantly, the study highlighted the need to strengthen appreciation for local arts and traditions to preserve regional identity amidst the influx of global culture. The research underlines that cultural exposure does not necessarily erode local identity if supported by a conscious appreciation of one's own cultural heritage.

In a different context, Migyoung Kwon (2021) conducted a study titled "A Study on the Cultural Awareness and Learning of Korean Culture of International Students—Focusing on Chinese International Students". This study examined how Chinese students in a Korean university perceive both Korean and Chinese cultures, and how these perceptions affect their learning experiences in a general education course titled "Understanding Korean Culture." Using a quantitative survey method, the study found that Chinese students tend to view Korean culture as modern and appealing, while

perceiving their own culture as more traditional. Despite this contrast, students recognized many similarities between the two cultures, which facilitated their engagement and satisfaction in learning Korean culture. The study emphasizes that acknowledging cultural similarities and positive perceptions can enhance the effectiveness of cultural education for international students. It also highlights the importance of culturally responsive teaching strategies in fostering deeper cultural understanding.

Both studies focus on students' perceptions of Korean culture, but they differ in scope and context. The first centres on Indonesian high school students' cultural resilience in the face of foreign cultural influence, while the second examines how Chinese university students in Korea perceive and learn about Korean culture. While both offer valuable insights into students' engagements with Korean culture, they do not address a specific and important dimension: how language and culture learning influence students' perceptions of social issues in South Korea.

This research seeks to fill that gap by focusing on Indonesian university students who are actively studying the Korean language. Unlike previous studies that explore general cultural perceptions, this study investigates whether and how exposure to Korean language and culture shapes students' understanding of contemporary Korean social issues—such as gender equality, labor dynamics, and inter-Korean relations. Given the growing relevance of intercultural competence in global education and employment, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how language and culture education fosters critical awareness, empathy, and cross-cultural sensitivity among learners.

Method

This study employed a quantitative research method using a survey design to investigate the relationship between Korean language and culture learning and students' perceptions of social issues in South

Korea. The data were collected through an online questionnaire administered to students studying Korean language and culture at Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM), Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The questionnaire measured students' knowledge and understanding of Korean language and culture, as well as their perceptions of various social issues in Korea.

The data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods, particularly to examine the relationships between variables related to language/cultural proficiency and students' socio-cultural awareness. The study sample consisted of 28 students, including those enrolled in the Korean Language program at the Department of Language, Arts, and Cultural Management, Vocational College UGM, as well as students from other faculties at UGM who were taking General Korean Language elective courses at the Faculty of Cultural Sciences.

This sample was deemed sufficiently representative, as all participants were actively engaged in learning both the Korean language and its associated cultural elements. Ethical research practices were upheld throughout the study, including obtaining informed consent from all participants. The primary data were derived from the questionnaire responses, while secondary data included scholarly articles, books, research reports, and credible online sources that provided theoretical and contextual support for the analysis.

This study is grounded in Cultural Relativism Theory, which serves as a relevant lens for analyzing how language and culture learning can influence students' perceptions of social issues in South Korea. Cultural Relativism posits that the norms, values, and behaviors of a society should be understood within their own cultural context, rather than being judged by external standards or comparisons to other cultures (Brown 2008).

The core principle of Cultural Relativism asserts that concepts of "right" and "wrong," or "good" and "bad," are not universal, but rather culturally specific. What is considered ethical or acceptable

in one society may not be perceived similarly in another. Therefore, learners engaging with a foreign language and culture must suspend ethnocentric judgments and strive to understand a society on its own terms. The theory rejects hierarchical evaluations of culture and emphasizes the importance of appreciating each culture's unique worldview, moral logic, and internal coherence.

In the context of this research, Cultural Relativism provides a theoretical foundation for examining how Indonesian students' perceptions of social issues in Korea may shift as they gain deeper knowledge of the Korean language and culture. Through this lens, students are encouraged to view Korean social phenomena—such as gender roles, labor issues, or political tensions—not through the lens of Indonesian norms, but from within the framework of Korean societal values and historical experience. This approach enables a more empathetic, informed, and culturally contextual understanding, aligning with the goals of intercultural competence and global citizenship.

Social Issues in South Korea

South Korea faces a range of pressing social issues that reflect the country's complex socio-economic transformations. Among these are issues related to work culture, beauty standards, changing family dynamics, individualism, and generational disillusionment. These phenomena are increasingly shaping the lives of South Koreans and offer important insights into contemporary Korean society.

Gwarosa

The term *gwarosa* (과로사) refers to deaths due to overwork. The country has one of the longest working hours in the world, with an average of 42 hours per week. These long working hours cause many workers to experience stress that affects their physical and mental health.

The issue only began to gain national attention after several government employees died from *gwarosa*. In 2018, the South Korean government enacted a law that reduced the working week from 68 to 52 hours. Deaths due to overwork have become one of the most debated issues. According to a survey that supports this, 52.1% of civil servants were found to work even on weekends, and 28.3% of them stated that they worked without taking a break. When asked why overwork occurs, 67.2% of them answered that a shortage of workers caused the excessive workload.

Plastic Surgery

Plastic surgery is another prominent social issue in South Korea, driven by the country's rigid and often unrealistic beauty standards. The Korean entertainment industry, dominated by idols with idealized facial features and body proportions, reinforces these norms. Physical appearance is frequently linked to personal success in both career and marriage, creating immense pressure—especially on women—to conform. As Holliday and Elfving-Hwang (2012) note, appearance management has become a critical part of social and professional life in South Korea.

Data further underscores the prevalence of this phenomenon. According to ISESP data in 2021, South Korea had the highest number of plastic surgeries per capita. A 2020 Statista survey of 1,500 respondents found that plastic surgery is particularly widespread among young women: nearly 25% of women aged 19–29 had undergone a procedure, compared to just 2% of men in the same age group. The percentage rises to 31% for women and 4% for men aged 30–39. Often dubbed the "plastic surgery capital of the world," South Korea holds a 25% share of the global market. In some families, plastic surgery is so normalized that it is even given as a graduation gift, reflecting how deeply embedded it has become in contemporary Korean society.

Honjok

Honjok (혼족) is a term in South Korea that refers to individuals who choose to engage in activities alone, such as eating, drinking, shopping, or traveling. The term gained popularity around 2017 as more people began embracing solitary lifestyles in contrast to the traditionally communal and group-oriented Korean culture. Linguistically, *honjok* combines "*hon-ja*" (혼자), meaning "alone," and "*bu-jok*" (부족), meaning "tribe," symbolizing a new social group formed by individuals who prefer solitude. This trend marks a significant cultural shift, reflecting changing values and lifestyles in modern Korean society.

The rise of the *honjok* lifestyle is driven by various social factors, particularly a growing disinterest or dissatisfaction with social relationships. Many individuals report feeling burdened by unnecessary social obligations or emotionally exhausting interactions, leading them to opt for a more independent lifestyle. Rather than seeking constant social validation, *honjok* individuals find comfort and autonomy in solitude. This lifestyle not only reflects a personal preference but also a broader societal transformation where independence, self-care, and emotional boundaries are becoming increasingly valued in response to Korea's fast-paced and high-pressure social environment.

Jolhon

In South Korea, *jolhon* is emerging as a popular alternative to divorce, particularly among couples who have been married for a long time. *Jolhon*, often described as "graduating from marriage," allows couples to live separate lives while remaining legally married. Rather than adhering to traditional marital roles, individuals embrace a "second life," where they live independently and pursue personal goals without the obligations typically associated with married life. This concept challenges conventional views of marriage and provides a non-confrontational option for couples who no longer wish to live together but do not want to formally divorce.

The rise of *jolhon* reflects shifting social norms and the evolving nature of family life in South Korea. While marriage is still regarded as a sacred institution, increasing household conflicts, lifestyle differences, and emotional fatigue have made long-term cohabitation difficult for many. These challenges have led to new ways of understanding marital relationships in modern society. *Jolhon* offers a solution that acknowledges these realities—allowing couples to part ways in practice without legal separation, thereby preserving social stability while accommodating individual freedom and well-being.

Godoksa

Godoksa (고독사) refers to the phenomenon of individuals who live and die alone, with their deaths often going unnoticed for some time. This reflects the weakening of social bonds in modern South Korean society. In Seoul, there are around 162 confirmed *godoksa* cases each year—about one every two days. In 2013, the city recorded 162 confirmed and 2,181 suspected cases among nearly one million single-person households.

These solitary deaths typically involve individuals living in poor conditions, such as *gosiwon* (tiny, low-cost boarding rooms). Many also suffer from chronic illnesses like alcoholism or diabetes. The rise of *godoksa* highlights the need for stronger social safety nets and better support for those living in isolation.

Samgaji Pogi

Samgaji Pogi (삼가지 포기), commonly shortened to *Sampo* (삼포), refers to a generation in South Korea that has given up on three major life milestones: dating, marriage, and having children. The term emerged in the early 2010s, capturing the growing sentiment among young adults who felt unable or unwilling to pursue these traditional life paths due to changing social values and personal priorities.

The rise of the *Sampo* generation is largely driven by intense social pressures and economic challenges, including rising living costs, expensive education, limited job security, and unaffordable housing. These burdens have led many young Koreans to abandon the pursuit of romantic relationships and family life, viewing them as unrealistic or unsustainable in modern South Korean society.

Chilsang Pogi

Chilsang Pogi (칠상 포기), also known as *Chosan* (초산), refers to a generation in South Korea that has given up on seven aspects of life: marriage, children, dating, homeownership, car ownership, travel, and achieving a high income. This term reflects a deeper level of resignation compared to the earlier "*Sampo*" generation. It illustrates the growing sense of despair among young people who find these life goals increasingly unattainable in the face of modern societal and economic realities.

The primary reasons behind this phenomenon include rising living costs, economic instability, job scarcity, and intense societal pressure. Many South Korean youth express frustration and anxiety about their social standing, often feeling that their family's financial background fails to meet the expected norms. These feelings of inadequacy and inequality lead many to abandon conventional aspirations, opting instead for survival and self-preservation in a highly competitive and unequal society.

Korean Language Students' Perception of South Korea's Social Issues

A total of 28 respondents participated in the questionnaire, consisting of 23 women (82.1%) and 5 men (17.9%). As shown in Figure 1, the respondents' ages ranged from 17 to 24 years, with 19 being the most common age. The participants came from various study programs at Universitas Gadjah Mada, with the majority majoring in English.

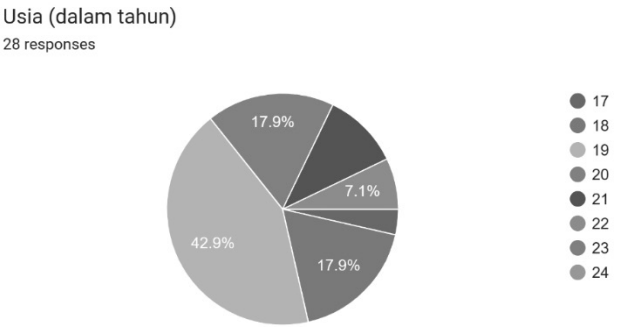

Figure 1. The Respondents' Ages

Most respondents follow news about Korea a few times a week (50%), while 28% follow it daily. The remaining respondents follow Korean news once a week (10.7%) or rarely (10.7%). Regarding their experience in learning the Korean language, 57.1% have studied it for 1–5 years, 28.6% for 5–10 years, and 14.3% for less than a year. Respondents primarily obtain information about Korean culture from YouTube or blogs (42.9%) and social media (42.9%), with smaller percentages citing Korean dramas or songs (3.6%), classroom learning (7.1%), and online news (3.6%). When asked about their understanding of Korean culture, 64.3% stated they had a fair understanding, while 35.7% admitted they did not.

The responses to the open-ended question on the most dominant events in Korean culture today revealed a wide spectrum of student perceptions, which can be grouped into several key themes. One prominent theme is the influence of the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*), including the global popularity of K-pop, K-dramas, and Korean films. Respondents highlighted the widespread appeal of these cultural products and the emergence of many new idol groups, which are consumed by audiences across age groups and countries. Related to this, several students mentioned the increasing intersection of pop

culture and politics, including celebrity scandals allegedly used to divert attention from government issues, as well as the extremely young age at which some idols debut.

Another recurring issue is plastic surgery culture, where respondents observed that cosmetic procedures are normalized in Korean society, often encouraged by family members, especially after high school graduation. This is closely tied to appearance-based social pressure and the desire to resemble celebrities, reflecting deeper societal expectations. Several respondents also addressed social problems and mental health concerns, such as school-related stress, gender-based discrimination, patriarchy, and Korea's declining birth rate, all of which are becoming more visible in public discourse.

In addition, some participants raised awareness of sexual misconduct and privacy violations, including cases of sexual harassment, stalking, secret camera crimes (*molka*), and the broader issue of a permissive "free association" culture. Scandals such as the Burning Sun case were mentioned as examples of systemic problems in the entertainment industry. Finally, consumerism also appeared in the responses, with one student noting a growing obsession with branded goods and its parallel with the rise in sales of prepackaged meals (*dosirak*) in convenience stores, signalling a deeper cultural shift. Despite the diversity of responses, the overarching themes reflect a critical awareness of both the global appeal and the underlying challenges of contemporary Korean culture.

Since this research focuses on seven specific social issues in South Korea—*Gwarosa, Korean plastic surgery, Honjok, Jolhon, Godoksa, Sampo,* and *Chosan*—respondents were asked whether they were familiar with these terms. As shown in Figure 2, the responses varied considerably. Korean plastic surgery emerged as the most widely recognized term among participants, while *Jolhon* was the least familiar.

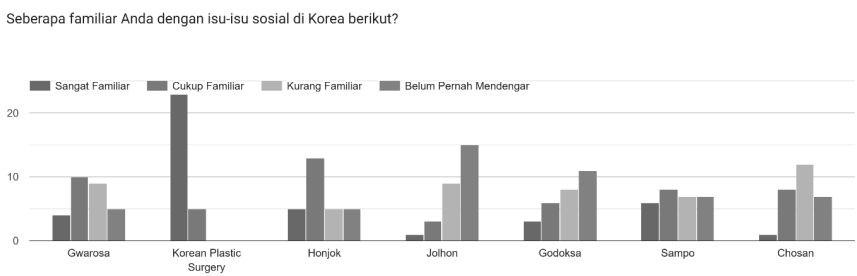

Figure 2. Students' Familiarity with Social Issues in South Korea

Gwarosa

According to Kang (2020), the phenomenon of *gwarosa* in South Korea—comparable to karoshi (death from overwork) in Japan—is rooted in work addiction. This addiction can have damaging effects not only on individuals' physical and mental health but also on their social relationships and the overall soundness of organizations (Schaef & Fassel, 1988). Gwarosa has become a critical issue in South Korean society, drawing increasing attention from both researchers and the media.

The data from this study reveal that many respondents view *gwarosa* as a serious social problem (Figure 3). Although some respondents expressed the opinion that the media may overemphasize the issue, most still maintain a generally positive view of Korean culture. Despite this, the survey results clearly indicate that *gwarosa* is perceived as having a negative impact on society, highlighting the complex interplay between cultural admiration and social critique.

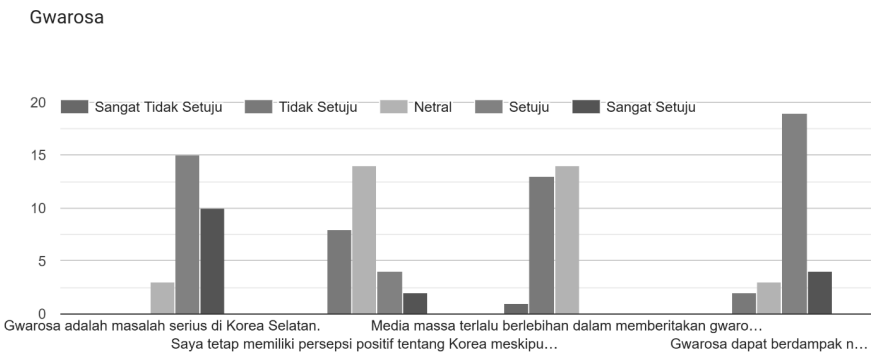

Figure 3. Korean Language Students' Perceptions of *Gwarosa*

Plastic Surgery

Figure 4 highlights growing concern over the widespread practice of plastic surgery in South Korea. Many respondents believe it is a serious issue, with a perception that the media plays a significant role in amplifying its importance. According to Murtiningsih (2016), physical appearance is crucial for Korean youth, who often associate outward appearance with self-worth. This concern extends beyond cosmetic preferences to include makeup, fashion, and accessories, as appearance is often viewed as a reflection of one's personality. A well-groomed and attractive individual is typically perceived as competent and capable, which can positively influence employment opportunities.

The cultural emphasis on beauty has led many young Koreans to pursue plastic surgery as a means of enhancing their appearance and boosting self-confidence. Wahyudi (2011) notes that many Korean parents support and even encourage their children to undergo cosmetic procedures. Korean beauty standards differ significantly from those in Western countries, favoring features such as a pointed chin, double eyelids, a defined nose, small mouth, large eyes, and minimal under-eye fat. These ideals, deeply embedded in Korean society, continue to drive the high demand for cosmetic enhancements.

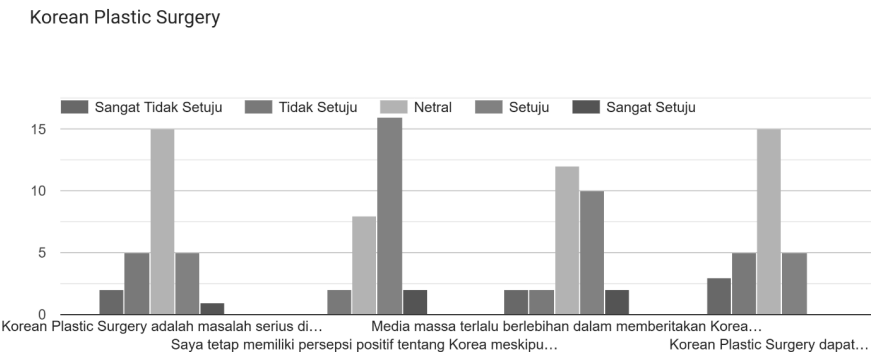

Figure 4. Korean Language Students' Perception of Plastic Surgery

Honjok

Figure 5 presents survey findings on public perceptions of *honjok*—a Korean term referring to being or eating alone. Many respondents agree or strongly agree that *honjok* is a serious social issue in South Korea. While it is viewed as concerning, there is also a prevailing perception that the media tends to exaggerate its prevalence and impact. Despite the negative connotations associated with *honjok*, this issue does not significantly affect the overall positive image of Korean society.

According to Costrani and Burhan (2024), *honjok* reflects a lifestyle choice characterized by independence and freedom in decision-making, especially in daily routines and leisure activities. Indicators of *honjok* include a preference for solitude, enjoying time alone, prioritizing self-care, and developing empathy through self-reflection (Nurmanisa 2024). For women in particular, traditional gender roles often impose limitations on their autonomy. The *honjok* lifestyle offers them greater personal freedom, allowing for self-development without the constraints of societal expectations (Costrani and Burhan 2024).

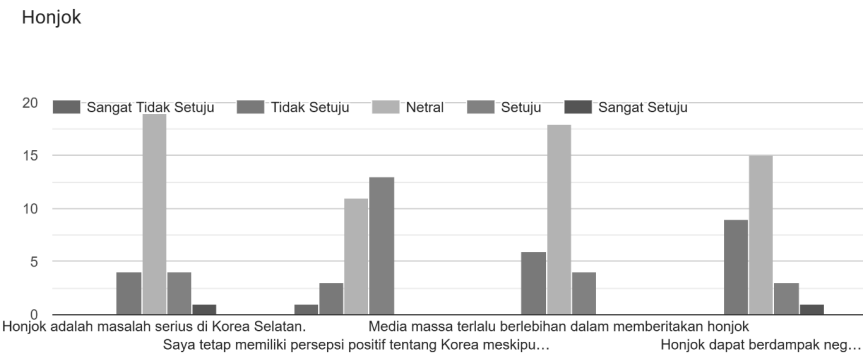

Figure 5. Korean Language Students' Perception of *Honjok*

Jolhon

Figure 6 presents the results of a survey on public opinion about *jolhon* in South Korea. *Jolhon* refers to "graduating from marriage," a concept where couples choose to live separately without formally divorcing. Many respondents agree or strongly agree that *jolhon* is a concerning social issue. Despite this concern, it does not significantly affect the overall positive perception of Korean society. The increasing visibility of *jolhon* reflects broader shifts in societal views on marriage, particularly in response to modern pressures and individual lifestyle preferences.

Ryou (2018) explains that *jolhon* represents a transition from traditional marital roles, differing from divorce in both intent and legal status. The term, originally coined in Japan and introduced to Korea in mid-2016, has gained traction through popular media such as television dramas, documentaries, and talk shows. In modern Korea, *jolhon* describes couples who, while remaining legally married, choose to live independently and redefine their relationship. This approach stems from mutual agreement and signifies a shift in the understanding of marriage—not just as a contract, but as a flexible institution shaped by individual agency.

Gender roles in marriage have traditionally been defined by patriarchal ideologies and Confucian beliefs in East Asian societies, including South Korea. Within this framework, men were expected to be breadwinners, while women took on the role of housekeepers (Yoo and Joo 2022). These traditional gender roles, deeply rooted in Confucian marital customs, placed particular pressure on women to uphold long and obedient marriages, reinforcing rigid distinctions between husbands and wives in heterosexual unions (Hyun 2001).

According to Yoo and Joo (2022), *jolhon* can be seen as a form of LAT (living-apart-together) relationship, where long-married couples remain legally married but choose to live separate lives after enduring years of obligation and dissatisfaction. This arrangement offers a less conventional path than divorce, often avoiding its associated social stigma. The rise of *jolhon* and similar trends suggests that middle-aged Koreans—part of a transitional generation—are increasingly adopting more individualized, Western-influenced views of marriage that emphasize personal fulfilment over traditional, child-cantered commitments.

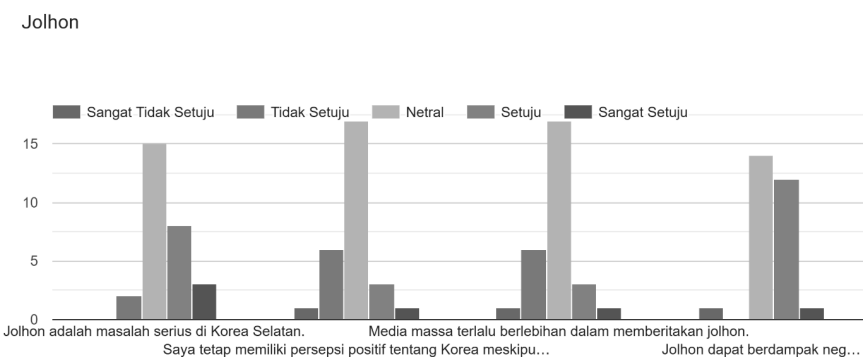

Figure 6. Korean Language Students' Perception of *Jolhon*

Godoksa

Godoksa is a Korean term that refers to dying alone without the presence of family or friends. The term first appeared in South Korean media in 2006 (Kim 2023). Linguistically, *godoksa* (고독사) combines *godok* (고독), meaning "loneliness," and *sa* (사), meaning "death" (Dewi and Sulastri 2023). It is widely recognized as a serious social issue in South Korea, with many survey respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that *godoksa* is cause for concern. Figure 7 reflects public perception that this phenomenon is troubling, though there is also a general sentiment that the media exaggerates its prevalence and impact. Despite these concerns, most respondents still hold a positive overall view of South Korea. Research has shown that individuals living alone often experience low levels of social participation, placing them at risk of isolation (Kwon 2020). Weak social ties limit access to job opportunities and hinder involvement in community life. As these individuals lose social roles and become socially excluded, they face a heightened risk of experiencing *godoksa*—dying in solitude, with their deaths going unnoticed for extended periods (Dewi and Sulastri 2023).

Kim (2017) explored the *godoksa* phenomenon among the elderly in the context of South Korea's aging population. By analyzing news articles, the study identified key risk factors and proposed prevention strategies. Factors contributing to *godoksa* among the elderly include economic hardship, chronic illness, mental health challenges, social isolation, estrangement from family or community, unemployment, and the rise of single-person households. To address this issue, researchers recommend universal prevention programs, integrated care systems for seniors living alone, and targeted intervention programs for those nearing the end of life (Dewi and Sulastri 2023).

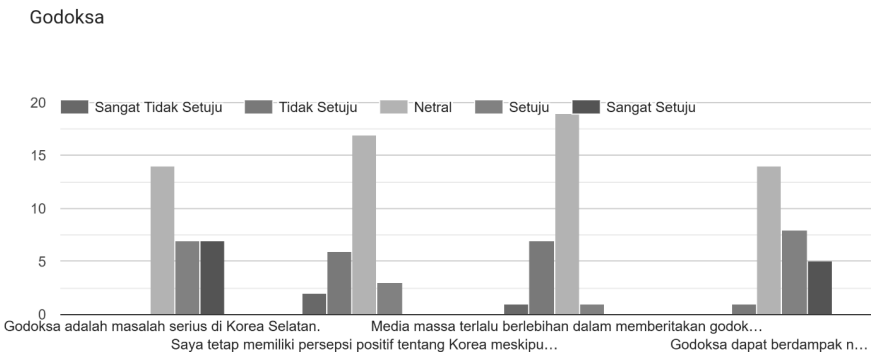

Figure 7. Korean Language Students' Perception of *Godoksa*

Sampo

Young Koreans in their twenties and thirties are often referred to as the *Sampo Generation*. The term originates from *Samposedae*, which roughly translates to the "three-giving-up generation." *Sampo* means "three" and "giving up," referring to the growing trend among young people to forgo dating, marriage, and childbearing. Over time, the concept expanded to include five and eventually seven sacrifices—adding home ownership, personal dreams, and even hope (Jeong 2020). This generational shift is largely attributed to skyrocketing housing prices and a lack of stable, well-paying jobs (Choi 2023). Figure 8 reveals a public perception that *sampo* is a troubling social issue, though there is general agreement that the media exaggerates its frequency and impact. Despite concerns, most respondents still maintain a positive view of South Korea overall.

The rise of the *Sampo Generation* raises critical questions about the social and economic conditions contributing to this phenomenon, as well as its implications for South Korea's demographic and societal future. The study underscores the urgent need for targeted policies and interventions to address the root causes that drive young people toward *sampo* choices. One alarming statistic is that over 58% of South Koreans aged 15 to 29 are not engaged in paid

employment, driven by the country's low labor force participation and a youth unemployment rate of around 10%. Many students opt to continue their education as a way to delay confronting a difficult job market. Moreover, the mandatory 21- to 24-month military service for all men adds further pressure to an already challenging employment landscape (Kim 2015). The South Korean government must respond swiftly to tackle these interrelated issues before they further undermine the country's social fabric and economic vitality.

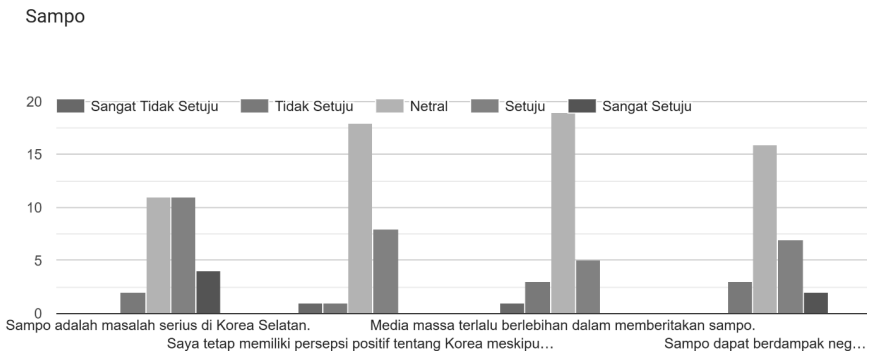

Figure 8. Korean Language Students' Perception of *Sampo*

Chosan

Chosan is a Korean term referring to the decision—mostly by young people—to give up on seven major life goals, such as dating, marriage, childbearing, homeownership, and others. Many respondents agree that *chosan* is a serious problem in South Korea, with the survey indicating a growing public concern over this phenomenon (Figure 9). While recognized as a pressing issue, it does not entirely overshadow the generally positive view people maintain about Korean society. The survey raises important questions about the social and psychological well-being of those who engage in *chosan*, while also pointing to the media's influential role in shaping public perception and potentially deepening the stigma surrounding this

trend. According to Jun (2023), low employment rates and frequent societal disruptions have made life particularly difficult for Korean university students. These students often face long preparation periods before entering the workforce, prompting the government to reform university curricula and prioritize departments that offer better employment prospects.

The *chosan* phenomenon carries serious implications for South Korea's declining birth rate. While some causes reflect global trends—such as economic hardship, extended educational periods, and weakening communal values—others are uniquely tied to East Asian contexts. Regional factors include a strong emphasis on human capital, hyper-competitive education systems, high childcare and education costs, lack of family-friendly policies, persistent patriarchy, gender inequality, and underdeveloped social safety nets. Since 2000, South Korea's falling birth rates have also been linked to slow economic growth, an increasingly flexible but unstable labor market, and the growing insecurity young people face regarding jobs and income (Park 2020). Together, these structural challenges contribute to the rise of *chosan* and reflect broader demographic and social transformations in Korean society.

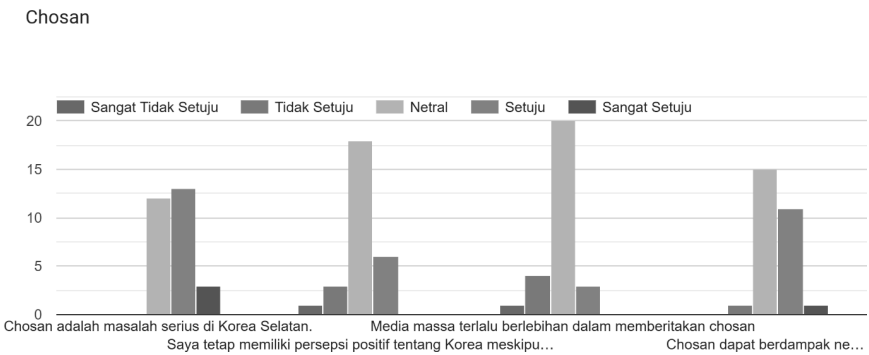

Figure 9. Korean Language Students' Perception of *Chosan*

Conclusion

Students fluent in Korean can access a broader range of information sources, which helps them Students who are fluent in Korean have access to a wider range of information sources, enabling them to develop more balanced and informed perspectives on social issues in South Korea. A deeper understanding of Korean history, culture, and society allows students to better appreciate the complexities of these issues. Language and cultural studies help learners move beyond simplistic or one-dimensional interpretations, fostering more nuanced, empathetic, and culturally sensitive viewpoints. This, in turn, promotes greater openness to cultural differences and enhances their comprehension of how South Korean society functions. Ultimately, such education encourages students to engage with global social issues and nurtures their development as informed and responsible global citizens.

The findings of this study highlight the critical role of integrating cultural learning into foreign language education to deepen students' social understanding. These results offer valuable insights for policymakers and educators aiming to develop initiatives that promote intercultural competence and awareness of international social issues. However, the study has several limitations, including its narrow focus on workplace-related social problems, a limited sample size, and reliance on self-reported data, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research should consider a more diverse student population, including individuals from various cultural backgrounds and language proficiency levels. Additionally, future studies could explore specific social issues—such as race, gender, or socioeconomic inequality—to better understand the complex intersections between language learning, cultural knowledge, and social awareness.

Funding

This research is made possible by funding from Dana Masyarakat, Vocational College, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, 2024.

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