Social Networks of Bangladeshi International Students in Gwangju, Korea : focusing on the weak ties

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Abstract

International migrant students (IMS) increasingly depend on social networks to navigate academic life & social challenges in the host countries. In Korea where the number of IMS has increased sharply, enrollments reached 300,000 in August 2025 (Ministry of Education,2025). However, previous studies have paid limited attention to 'how 'regional city contexts' shape IMS' social networks in Korea particularly weak social ties (WST). This paper investigates the experiences of Bangladeshi international students (BMS) in Gwangju city, Korea, with a specific focus on how weak social ties (WST) are built, the challenges involved in supporting these ties, & their implications for social & academic life. This research is grounded on M. Granovetter's theory (1973) of the 'strength of weak ties'; the study followed a narrative qualitative research approach to examine the lived experience of Bangladeshi international students (BIS) studying in a regional Gwangju metropolitan city by using in-depth, semi structured interviews with ten BIS enrolled at Chosun University & Chonnam National University (CNU). Interviewees were selected through snowball & purposive sampling & the interviews data analyzed thematically & manually by using 'J Caulfield (2023) thematic analysis framework that originally developed by Braun & Clarke's (2006).

The findings reveal that, weak social ties (WST) among Bangladeshi international students (BIS) are mainly built through institutional & functional spaces rather than strong personal relationships. The main places for the formation of WST include university classrooms, dormitories, Lab, International office programs, co-ethnic student organizations, student clubs, non-government organizations (NGOs), religious groups & online platforms, for

instance Kakao Talk & Facebook groups. These networks are generally target-oriented & facilitate access to resources, new information & opportunities rather than emotional support. WST plays a vital role in sharing academic & administrative information, finding language related assistance, navigating visa & employment regulations, accessing temporary accommodation and identifying academic & employment opportunities such as teaching assistantships (TA), conference participation, research collaboration and part-time job.

Despite their important role, the formation of WST is constrained by various interrelated challenges. Low Korean Language proficiency limit interaction with Korean peers, professors & administrative staff, while structural nature of the Korean academic system such as long lab working hours, supervisor centered relationships, academic performance pressure & visa related employment restrictions decrease opportunities for broader social involvement. Also, cultural distance for instance differences in food practices, religious norms, perceived racial & national positioning, further limits interaction beyond co-ethnic networks. As a result, participants experience SWT as functional yet socially distant networks.

This research sums up that WST plays an important but limited role in shaping the academic adaptation & daily social life of BIS in Korea. While WST assists short term adjustment & access to resources, they do not entirely focus on issues of social inclusion & long-term belonging. The result emphasizes the need for university & policymakers to reinforce institutional system that accelerates significant intercultural interaction, especially in regional cities, to improve the social integration & academic experiences of IMS.

Keywords: Social network, Weak social ties (WST), Bangladeshi international students (BIS), South Korea