

# Negotiating Racial Identities Through Korean Language Learning: Learners of Korean as a Foreign Language in a US University

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**ABSTRACT:** This qualitative study examines the experiences of twelve non-heritage learners of Korean in a Korean as a Foreign Language (KFL) setting at a US university. The findings show (a) how learners understand the construct of race inside and outside of Korean language learning spaces; (b) how learners' real and imagined communities influence their identities and language learning; and (c) how learning Korean influences learners' racial identities and how these racial identities play a role in Korean language learning. This study attempts to address and start a dialogue regarding race and racial identities in the Korean language classrooms.

**KEYWORDS:** Korean language learners, racial identities, imagined communities, Korean as a foreign language, raciolinguistics

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Korean is one of the fastest-growing languages in the world, reflecting the rise in the popularity of Korean culture (Yeung, 2023). The increasing popularity of *Hallyu* (The Korean Wave) has led to a growing number of Korean language learners worldwide (Conner, 2021; R. Kim, 2021). The rising global popularity of Korean music, film, drama, beauty products, and food are among the factors that are credited for the surge in Korean language learners across the globe. While the different 'waves' of Korean popular culture play a role in the growing population of Korean language learners, specific K-pop bands or K-dramas are said to influence this trend as well. For example, the K-pop boy band BTS (Bangtan Boys) has motivated many of their fans to learn Korean in countries including the US, UK, France, Kenya, Myanmar, and Indonesia (S. Lee, 2021). Meanwhile, after the

release of the Korean show, *Squid Game*, there was a surge in Korean language learners worldwide (Cha & Seo, 2021). With the increasing population of Korean language learners, a growing body of literature in Korean language education explores learner identities, learner motivations, teaching and learning strategies, and the role of Korean popular culture in language learning (I. Lee, 2018; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2019; Wang & Pyun, 2020).

Despite these rapidly growing studies in the field, little is known about how mixed-race Korean and non-heritage learners of Korean negotiate their identities in relation to their Korean language learning journeys (H. Kim, 2016; H. Kim, 2022). Particularly, there are few insights into how learners negotiate *racial* identities through Korean language learning in the Korean as a Foreign Language (KFL) context outside of Korea; the majority of research is based on *ethnic* or *cultural* identities of Korean language learners. It is important, however, to investigate *racial* identities of Korean language learners, as all learners continue to reflect on the meaning of being a part of a racial group and negotiate their racial identities inside and outside the language classrooms (Kubota & Lin 2009; Motha, 2014). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how non-heritage KFL learners, who are university students in the United States, understand the construct of race and their racial identities inside and outside of Korean language learning spaces; how learners' real and imagined communities influence their identities and language learning; how learning Korean influences learners' racial identities and these racial identities play a role in Korean language learning. The following questions guided this study:

1. How do participants understand race inside and outside Korean language learning spaces?
2. How do *imagined communities* play a role in participants' identities and language learning?
3. How do participants construct and negotiate their racial identities through the processes of learning Korean as a foreign language in the US context?

### Framing Ideas and Literature

To better understand how non-heritage KFL learners perceive race, identities, and imagined communities in relation to Korean language learning, three framing ideas drawn from literature provide guidance to navigate the terrain. First, theories about race, language, and identities allow us to understand how language learners construct and negotiate their racial identities through language learning, as well as how they perceive race inside and outside the language classroom. Second, studies about the identities of Korean language learners inform us about the specific context of Korean language learning in which KFL learners negotiate their identities. Finally, research on imagined communities of language learners facilitate the analysis of how imagined communities play a role specifically in the identity development and language learning process of KFL learners.

## Race, Language, and Identities

Language plays a significant role in socialization and the development of identities, as it weaves speakers and learners of the language with cultures and societies. Within the context of language learning and language socialization, Lave and Wenger (1991) contend that learning is an inherently social process that involves the construction of identities through interaction and negotiation with others. Language learners continuously negotiate and renegotiate their identities throughout the language learning processes and enact new communicative selves across different sites and different points of time. Language learners' identities are socially and historically constructed, and different processes of identification have significant impacts on learners' participation in the target community and language learning (Williams et al., 2012).

There has been a growing body of research showing how language shapes our ideas and perceptions about race, and how racial identities are negotiated through language and language learning (Alim et al., 2016). Race is socially and historically constructed and shaped by discourses that give specific meanings to the way we see the world (Kubota & Lin, 2009). While race typically refers to phenotypic characteristics such as skin color or facial features, language is also used as a basis of racial group characterization. For example, different dialects and accents may be used in the processes of enracement (Curtis & Romney, 2019).

Language not only influences our understanding of race, but we continue to negotiate racialized selves through languages and language learning. Many scholars in the second language acquisition field explore the centrality of race in language learning and teaching (Bonilla-Medina et al., 2021; Kubota & Lin, 2009; Motha, 2006; 2014). Language learning, specifically, is mediated by racialized identities that shape learners' participation in different communities (Anya, 2017). Research on learners' racial identities and language learning shows how learners continue to reflect on the meaning of being a part of a racial group in various environments, including in the context of language learning.

With regards to English language learning, the work of scholars such as Kubota and Lin (2009) and Motha (2014) are particularly insightful. For example, Kubota and Lin (2009), who investigated the relationship between race and language learning, observed how race and racial identities influenced TESOL practitioners' classroom pedagogy and how they saw their students. Motha (2014) investigated how race and racial identities of American teachers affected teachers' anti-racist pedagogies as well as their professional relationships. While many studies have explored language learners' racial identities in the English language education field, more studies are examining language learners' racial identities in other language learning contexts as well. For example, Anya (2017) explored the experiences of Black American participants and how their identities were racialized in significant ways in a Portuguese language study abroad program in Brazil. Anya

illustrated how Black students navigated language learning and multilingualism, and learned ways in “understanding, doing, and speaking Blackness” in Brazil (Anya, 2017, p. 3).

### **Identities of Korean Language Learners**

The majority of studies on identities and language in the field of Korean language education focuses on *ethnic* identities (J. Kim, 2017; Y. Kim, 2020; Kong, 2011) or *cultural* identities (H. Lee, 2020). Much of this literature is based upon research involving identities of Korean heritage language learners; learners of Korean diaspora or “ethnic Koreans” (Kwon, 2014). While the term *Korean heritage learner* is generally associated with ethnicity, the term also has underlying racial assumptions; Korean heritage learner mostly refers to those who are Korean monoracials, learners with parents who both identify with the same ‘Korean’ race.

The lack of research on the racial aspects of language in Korean language education may be due to *Koreanness*, which can be defined as belonging to the Korean race or having Korean skin color and the ideologies of Korean racial dominance centered on this construct (H. Kim, 2022); it is the hegemony and racialized dichotomy of Korean/non-Korean that is so normalized in the Korean cultural context. In other words, the absence of discussion of race and racial identities in Korean language education may be understood in the context of racism, colorism, and Koreanness that permeate the Korean language field. With the growing mixed race Korean population—individuals with one Korean parent and one non-Korean parent—the term “heritage learner” has been problematized within the context of Korean language learning. For example, some studies have investigated mixed-race learners of Korean and their racial identities in relation to their “heritage language” learning (H. Kim 2016, 2021, 2022). Despite these efforts, little is known about the racial identities of mixed-race learners of Korean or non-heritage learners of Korean, particularly in the KFL setting.

### **Imagined Communities of Language Learners**

Both real communities and imagined communities are significant to language learning—a multilayered and multifaceted phenomenon—and may influence language learners’ identities, investment, and language learning (Hafner, 2019; Malinowski & Tufi, 2020; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Language learners may interact and have actual contact with speakers of the target language in their everyday life through physical face-to-face communities, including workplaces, religious communities, and educational institutions. However, language learners may envision and form identities in spaces that transcend time and space—their *imagined communities*. Imagined communities are “groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of imagination” (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 241). In other words, language learners

may create imaginary spaces and communities of the target language and cultural context; bridging the learner, local and target language contexts through the power of imagination. For this reason, the notion of imagined communities in language learning “has great implications for informing critical and transformative language pedagogy and making sense of language learners’ stories” (Al-Dhaif et al., 2022, p. 154).

Popular culture may allow language learners to access aspirational imagined communities (Norton, 2001). Motivations to learn a language may be rooted in a desire to participate in a society as depicted in popular culture and media (Murray, 2008). However, the kinds of communities that language learners imagine and desire for themselves are closely linked to the identity options that are “publicly visible and politically valued” (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007, p. 675). Media plays a powerful role in producing and reproducing these visible and valued identity options. “[W]hile powerfully presenting and endorsing some identity options, the media can also make some identity options ‘invisible’ or at least, devalue and delegitimize them” (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007, p. 675). The media also plays a central role in shaping and reinforcing ethnic and racial identity options, particularly in relation to language. In other words, race and ethnicity are also closely interwoven into the institutional and individual imagined communities of legitimate speakers. For example, media images and representations of native or legitimate speakers of English may be limited to a certain race, ethnicity, and skin color (e.g., White American male).

The emergence of new digital technologies, internet, and social media has also led to learners now connecting language learning with a range of real, virtual, and imagined communities. Language is used by learners for meaning-making purposes not only in real life but also in online communities of practice (Li, 2022). Social media cuts across boundaries of space and time, allowing language learners to build imagined communities, develop and express “new conceptualizations of one’s identity to transcultural audiences in informal, hybrid, and multimodal and polylingual ways, socialization into real and imagined communities” (Kaliampos, 2022, p. 106).

## **Methodology**

Qualitative research was chosen as the methodology used in this study. Qualitative studies focus on understanding the meanings of a phenomenon that are involved and to uncovering how people make sense of their lives and their worlds (Patton, 2002). According to Crotty (1998), “meanings are constructed by human beings as they engaged with the world they are interpreting” (p. 43). In the case of this study, the purpose was to understand how non-heritage learners of Korean language understand race and negotiate their racial identities in relation to Korean language learning and the meanings they attribute to their experiences.

Purposeful sampling was used to select information-rich cases for study in depth (Patton, 2022). According to Patton (2022), “Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling” (p. 230). Two criteria were used to select participants. First, to ensure that the participants were non-heritage learners of Korean, they would have to self-identify as a non-heritage learner of Korean. Next, participants had to have experience learning Korean, whether through the Korean language courses offered at the university or self-study.

## Participants and Setting

This study was conducted at a US university, which is located in the Northeastern region of the United States. The majority of Korean language learners at this university are non-heritage learners of Korean as a foreign language. Just 5-10 percent of the Korean language learner population at this university are of Korean heritage. Twelve university students who were non-heritage learners of Korean were a part of this study (see Table 1). I emailed the beginner, intermediate, and advanced-level Korean language classes at the university. The emails explained the purpose of the study; asked whether they self-identified as non-heritage learners of Korean; and asked how they were learning Korean (e.g., Korean language courses at the university, self-study, independent study). Prior to data collection, appropriate review and approval of the study was obtained by the university’s research review board. Voluntary, informed, and comprehended consent was obtained from all participants of this study prior to data collection.

**Table 1**

### *Information about the Participants*

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity*	Level(s) of Korean Course Taken at University	Length of Korean Language Learning
Stellah	White, Caucasian	1st, 2nd Year Korean	3 years
Harper	White	1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th Year Korean	5 years
Brooke	White	1st, 2nd Year Korean	3 years
Maeve	White, European	1st Year Korean	1 year
Piper	Caucasian, White	1st, 2nd, 3rd Year Korean	4 years
Esther	White, Arab	N/A	1 year

Daisy	Black American	1st Year Korean	1 year
Amelia	Black	1st Year Korean	1 year
Finley	African American	1st Year Korean	1 year
Layla	African American, African	1st, 2nd Year Korean	3 years
Gemma	Hispanic	1st Year Korean	1 year
Claire	Black, White, Native American, Puerto Rican, Mixed, No Specific Race	1st, 2nd, 3rd Year Korean	4 years

\*Refers to participants' self-identified race/ethnicity

### Data Collection and Analysis

The main sources of data for the present study were participants' written self-reflections and in-depth interviews conducted with each participant. The two sources of data were chosen because of their potential to tap into the participants' introspections about the various aspects of their identities and Korean language learning experiences. The two instruments were piloted and, where needed, revised. The written self-reflections included responses to five open-ended questions which included questions about participants' identities and racial identities, their Korean language learning journey, how language learning plays a role in their identity development, how Korean plays a role in their racial identities, and how participants are involved in Korean communities. For the primary sources of data, I adopted Helms's (1993) definition of racial identity as "a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perceptions that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group" (p. 3).

The interview data was collected by means of a semi-structured interview protocol. The protocol asked participants to describe and give examples, when appropriate, of their understandings about racial identities, their Korean language learning journeys, how Korean language learning plays a role in their sense of self (including racial identities), their understanding of race within and outside of the Korean language classroom, their involvement in Korean community and culture, and any communities (physical or imagined) related to Korean language learning in which they participated. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to one hour, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Collected data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcribed data from the interviews were read in an iterative manner along with the written self-reflections to have a thorough understanding of

participants' identities and Korean language learning journeys. Thematic analysis is a recursive process that includes stages of coding, discussion, and synthesis of broader themes that were repeated throughout the dynamic process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once completed, a process of member checking was carried out where each thematic analysis was sent to the respective participant to receive any feedback regarding the conceptualization and construction of their identities and language learning journeys.

### Understanding Race Inside and Outside Korean Language Learning Spaces

All participants each had their own understanding about the construct of race, and most participants understood race as being context-based. Several participants indicated how race is based on many factors, including physical appearance and cultural background, and has social and cultural implications. For example, Daisy, who self-identifies as Black American, explained how race may include skin color but also “how you were brought up culturally.” By contrasting her experience with a friend from Africa, she explained:

My friend—she was born in Kenya, and then she came to America, and I was born in America. So when it comes to talking about race, I like to say that I'm just Black American instead of African American because everything that she's learned and things like that... [My friend said] she didn't like how people say *African* American because she's actually from there. She knows the experience and stuff.

Many participants of the study illustrated how race may be understood differently in different countries and cultures (e.g., Puerto Rico, Lebanon, Dominican Republic, Korea). Participants of this study understood their own racial identities as socially constructed and contextual as well. For example, Claire delineated how race is understood differently in Puerto Rico and “mainland” US by illuminating her own identities. Claire, who was born in Puerto Rico and lived there until seven, shared that, while she lived in Puerto Rico, she did not think of her race much. However, after moving to the “mainland” US, she constantly needed to define herself in terms of race, which is difficult for her as she identifies as “Black, White, probably some Native American, Taíno, mixed, no specific race, Puerto Rican.”

Gemma, who identifies as Hispanic, shared how race is perceived differently in the US and the Dominican Republic, her home country. She explained that, in the Dominican Republic, people are categorized heavily on whether they are locals or foreigners rather than on the basis of race. Gemma illustrated her point that race is contextual by contrasting her experiences in the Dominican Republic and the US. In the US, members of her own family, although with shared cultural backgrounds, may fall under different racial categorizations:

My ethnicity is Hispanic but my race Black. But my mother's race would be considered White because of her skin color even though she is also Hispanic and has curly hair. Identities are honestly subject



to your environment and societal standards. In other countries I would not be considered Black and would be in more of a limbo race and it would float around the race spectrum.

It is noteworthy here that most participants of this study contextualized their Korean language learning as a space (e.g., Korean language classes) within the US, rather than viewing the Korean language learning space as its own context. In other words, there was no clear distinction for participants on how race was understood in the Korean language learning space and the US. Most of the participants' imagined communities, however, were different from the US; in participants' imagined communities, race and racial identities were understood less like that of the US. In participants' imagined communities, people were distinguished between Korean "national and foreigner" rather than based on racial categorization. Many participants also alluded to how race is "so heavily talked about" in the US and other Western countries, but not so much outside of the US (e.g., Korea, other Asian countries).

### **The Role of Real and Imagined Communities in Korean Language Learners' Identities and Language Learning**

Both real communities, including friends and peers in the Korean language classrooms, and imagined communities, including social media, were important to Korean language learners of this study.

#### **Real Communities of Korean Language Learners**

One of the most-referenced communities that participants reported included Korean friends and other Korean language learners. For many of the participants of this study, real communities of Korean language learners (e.g., classrooms, Korean language teachers, other social contexts, communities) provided a sense of belonging, motivation, communion, and rich foundation in negotiating new selves. For instance, Brooke explained that a Korean international student from Busan, whom she met in a law fraternity, became important in her Korean language learning journey. She also described how her Korean language learning peers were important, not only in her language learning but also her sense of self:

I think it [identity] has to do with, like, the language you're studying because of the fact that, like, Japanese and Korean are kind of really intensive languages to learn... plus your smaller classroom sizes, helps you to make friends with the people that you're studying language with... So it [friendship] spills over beyond just the classroom.

Brooke suggests that for many students taking Korean language courses in the university setting, Korean international students and Korean language learning peers played an important role in the language learning process.

Similarly, Stelah, who identifies as White and Caucasian, expressed how friends with similar interests have supported her through the Korean language learning journey, but also how the language learning process has, in turn, played a role in her identity construction and in building new communities:

[I have] more friends who are interested in the culture, the music, and the language from Korea.... Since starting to learn Korean, [my] friend group has become more racially and culturally diverse. In terms of personal identities, Korean language learning and friends have given [me] a new outlook and a more open mind about differences among cultures.

Much like Stelah, participants reported how their friend groups and communities have gradually transformed throughout their language learning journeys to include a much more diverse background of people.

### **Imagined Communities of Korean Language Learners**

For Korean language learners of this study, imagined communities were significant to their motivation, investment, as well as identities. Most of the participants of this study expressed that their imagined, idealized Korea—which was often constructed by popular culture and social media—affected their drive to speak Korean fluently and do well in Korean class, as well as their day-to-day lives. For Harper, her short summer visits to Korea and willingness to participate in Korean society influenced her motivation to learn Korean beyond the advanced Korean courses offered at the university and to invest in reading Korean novels. Harper also desired to be part of a society as depicted in Korean popular culture, which not only affected her language learning, but also played a role in her daily life. As she said, “Even though I’m obviously a White American girl, I still think, to some extent, I felt like the beauty standards of Korea affected me, and I was feeling, ‘Maybe I need to be slimmer seeing these really beautiful people.’”

Some participants of this study used social media to connect with other Korean language learners and as a resource for learning, while also creating and nurturing imagined communities. Claire mentioned that the presence of Korean language learners on social media gave her a sense of belonging that she is “one of the millions learning the language and spreading the culture to new people.” For other participants, social media was used simultaneously for real and imagined communities, particularly through Korean popular culture. For example, Amelia explained how she uses the Korean mobile messaging app KakaoTalk to communicate with her Korean language teacher and friends from her Korean language class. She also utilizes the open chat function on KakaoTalk to find others who may share interest in Korean language learning or Korean popular culture (e.g., K-pop, K-drama). Through the app, she was able to connect with

others with whom she chatted about “[online] games, K-pop and dramas” as well as “a lot of Koreans” who would chat with her in the target language.

It is noteworthy that, for three of the participants of this study, Amelia, Daisy, and Finley—who identify as Black, Black American, and African American, respectively—motivations and investment in Korean language learning did not necessarily correlate with their desired memberships in imagined communities. While none of the three participants had experiential and substantive knowledge of Korea, the media and narratives of other Black people in Korea were a factor in how these participants imagined their idealized “Korea.” For example, Amelia, who listens to Korean music and watches Korean movies and television shows on a daily basis, expressed concern about how her idealized Korea may be somewhat removed from the “real” Korea. “I’m kind of scared to go to Korea myself,” she said. “How Koreans perceive people of color, more-so Black people. I have heard they look down upon them compared to white people.”

Daisy had similar concerns with Amelia about how people of her race may be treated in Korea. The negative images, however, did not affect Daisy’s investment in Korean:

I’ve seen plenty of times that people who look like me aren’t well treated in Korea. I hope that me learning the language, and if I have the opportunity to go there, I can be a representation for all people that look like me and hopefully give us a better look.

If target language speakers are discriminatory (e.g., racist, sexist, or homophobic), a motivated language learner may have little investment in the language practices of the classroom or community (Byram, 2000). However, for Amelia, Daisy, and Finley, despite being aware of these concerns, positive encounters with Koreans in their real communities (e.g., Korean international students, Korean language teachers) and in the classroom played an important role in shaping their membership in the imagine community, legitimizing their new identity options, and allowing them to imagine themselves as agents of change.

### **Learners’ Racial Identity Constructions and Negotiations through KFL**

One of the most noticeable findings of this theme was the stark difference between white/Caucasian and non-white participants in terms of their motivations to learn Korean; how they contextualized themselves within the Korean as a Foreign Language (KFL) learning space; as well as their how they continued to negotiate their identities.

## “Not Just White”: White/Caucasian Identities of KFL Learners

Each participant who identified as having a white/Caucasian identity (albeit partial) expressed that they needed to “justify” or “prove” why they were learning Korean as a white learner. For white learners of this study, learning Korean was an addition to their white racial identities, which added “depth” to their whiteness. For example, Piper, who is an Asian Studies major, reported that she constantly needs to explain why she is learning Korean in her field of study.

It's always kind of like, “Why do you deserve to be here?” or, like, “Why are you here?” Like, it's seen as very strange and out of the ordinary to be interested in any type of Asian culture if you're white. So, it's always been like, [you] kind of have to justify and prove that you don't have bad intentions.

For Piper, learning Korean language and culture and studying Asian Studies created a space in which she could explore beyond her white identity. She shared that she felt she was “not just white” in many ways. Similarly, Maeve, who identifies as white and European, described how, since embarking on her Korean language learning journey, she constantly has to distinguish herself from stereotypes like “white people who are trying to become Korean” and the “whole Koreaboo concept.” Meanwhile, for Stelah, Korean language learning provided a valuable space for a sense of belonging and building identities. Stelah wrote how Korean language learning helped her to look beyond her whiteness in various lenses. As she said, “[I am] still white everywhere, but Korean provided the ‘plus’ in terms of personal identities.”

Meanwhile, Esther, who identifies as “white slash Middle Eastern,” believes she is more “white-presenting” than “just white.” Esther understands her racial identity as, “Yes, I'm white. But there's still that idea of Intersectionality.” In her Korean language learning journey, Esther draws connections between her “ethnic” Arab identity and imagined community. Throughout her Korean language journey, Esther also noted that “learning Korean has definitely given me the reminder of who I am and has helped me maintain the relationship of my racial identity with myself.”

## Non-white Identities of KFL Learners

All participants of this study who did not identify as solely white/Caucasian were aware of their racial identities as Korean language learners and they drew connections between their imagined communities and their home communities, which provided a motivation for learning as well. For many of the participants of color, the cultural proximity between participants' imagined community and their own racial/ethnic community allowed participants to, in a way, relate more closely to the imagined “Korea” as people of color, understand their own culture better, and include their Korean language learner identity as another of their multiple

identities (e.g., linguistic, racial, cultural). Claire, who speaks Spanish predominantly at home, explained that Korean language learning has influenced her various identities, including linguistic identities:

By learning Korean and about Korean culture I have been able to see aspects of my culture through a different lens. Although they [my family] are not actively learning Korean... when I communicate with them and switch between languages, they are able to keep a conversation going.

Gemma, who was drawn into learning Korean through K-pop, described how her journey in Korean language learning and interest in Korean popular culture has helped her appreciate her own Dominican Republic culture, as well as to be assertive of her own racial and ethnic identities. As she said,

I think learning Korean has shown me to value my culture and what makes my cultural background so beautiful... But I think seeing other cultures and learning Korean and seeing how people embrace their own culture and have stood up for it has definitely changed me... When I was younger, it gave me the courage to embrace my own culture and roots. I did not have to hide nor did I want to assimilate anymore.

In addition, some of the participants of color also mentioned how Korean language learning peers, who share their home language (e.g., Spanish, Tagalog) or cultural backgrounds, provide a sense of belonging in (re)constructing and negotiating their multiple identities and memberships. These co-learners also reflect and appreciate their own cultural heritages.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand how non-heritage KFL learners, who are university students, understand the construct of race and their racial identities inside and outside Korean language learning spaces; how learners' real and imagined communities influence their identities and language learning; how learning Korean influences learners' racial identities and how these racial identities play a role in Korean language learning. The research findings reported here are an attempt to add to existing literature on raciolinguistics, foreign language education, and imagined communities in language learning by starting a dialogue about race and racial identity in Korean language education.

The first theme of the present research helps explain how non-heritage learners of Korean understand race inside and outside Korean language learning spaces in a US context. Participants were aware of the social construct of race as well as their racial identities, and how race may be understood differently in different countries and cultures. This finding resonates with scholars who have argued that race is an historical, cultural, and political construction and racial categorizations are contextual (Kubota & Lin, 2009; Omi & Winant, 2015).

However, there wasn't a clear distinction between how participants understood race in the Korean language learning space and the US. In other words, learners in this study contextualized their Korean language learning as a space (e.g., Korean language classes) within the US, rather than viewing the Korean language learning space as its own context. Meanwhile, learners distinguished how race operates in the US from how it may operate in Korea or their imagined communities. This study engenders important implications for educators in Korean language education: Korean language classrooms are not a space where race is nonexistent; learners are constantly negotiating and renegotiating their understandings of race and racial identities through Korean language learning. The idea of colorblindness in the Korean language classrooms must be rejected and race-consciousness should be adopted to better understand the experiences of learners of all backgrounds (Husband, 2016).

The second theme of this study showed that both real and imagined communities were important to Korean language learners of this study, which is consistent with prior research that demonstrates the importance of both real and imagined spaces for language learning and teaching and better understanding of language learner communities (Hafner, 2019; Malinowski & Tufi, 2020). Particularly, participants pointed out the importance of Korean friends and other Korean language learners as a significant "community of learners" (Hafner & Miller, 2019, p. 168).

Social media was also brought up as a space where real and imagined communities may intersect, where language learners may build communities with other language learners, create affiliations through imagination, and construct their imagined communities. For many of the participants of this study, imagined communities were constructed by Korean popular culture and social media, and had a powerful influence on their language trajectories, agency, motivation, participation, and investment in language learning, which is consistent with previous studies (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Hence, instructors may consider developing social media-assisted language programs that integrate social media as an education tool (Al-Qaysi et al., 2020; Shamsi & Bozorgian, 2022) in Korean language teaching and learning. Future research may also focus on the intersection between social media, Korean popular culture, Korean language learners' imagined communities, and how that may affect learners' identities.

Also, the imagined communities of three participants of this study (who identified as Black, Black American, and African American) reflected an imagined *racial* community in which learners situated themselves. This leaves room for further research in examining racial imagined communities of the diverse population of Korean language learners and how "media may be playing a role in publicly visible and politically valued" (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007, p. 675) identity options of learners of diverse racial backgrounds. Also, while these three participants were aware of the possibly "discriminatory" L2 context, this did not deter them from their investment in Korean. Norton (2013) contended that negative self-perception related to imagined communities may result in nonparticipation. The findings of this study, however, did not support Norton's view that the L2

context may encourage resistance or nonparticipation when there is a “disjuncture between the learner’s imagined community and the... goals’ of language learning” (Norton, 2001, p. 170).

The third theme of the present study revealed how learners understood and negotiated their racial identities through the processes of learning Korean in a KFL context in the US. All learners of this study were aware of their racial identities in the Korean language learning space and the US; however, the findings showed that there were differences between how learners who identified as white/Caucasian contextualized their racial identities differently than that of non-white learners. White learners felt a need to justify why they were learning Korean. On the one hand, Korean language learning also added “depth” to white learners’ whiteness. On the other hand, for non-white learners, their Korean language learning journey helped draw connections between their home communities and imagined “Korea,” leading them to feel close to the target community. Korean language learning also was an encouragement to assert their own racial/ethnic identities. One participant, who identified as white and Arab, however, showed the importance of intersectionality; while she was aware of her whiteness in the Korean language learning space and the US, she also demonstrated how her Lebanese identity provided cultural proximity to her imagined community. Intersectionality offers a lens to better understand the overlapping, complex, multidimensional identities of learners; while this present study mainly focuses on the social construct of race as an analytical lens, research would be welcome on Korean language learners’ journeys and identities through the lens of Intersectionality.

The present research is an attempt to understand how non-heritage learners understand race, racial identities, and imagined communities in KFL in the US. It is crucial to acknowledge that race in Korean language learning spaces (e.g., Korean language classrooms) is not nonexistent; Korean language educators must reach the deepest level of race-consciousness, being conscious of their own racial identities as well as students’ racial identities. It is also important for educators to critically read the various racial messages that may be reflected in the increasingly popular Korean culture, which may be sources of learners’ imagined racial communities. Finally, more attention needs to be paid to the implications of how Korean language learners (re)construct and (re)negotiate their various identities for pedagogical practices.

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