

Transnationalism and Its Impact on the Creation of Collective Agency: The Case of Korean Military Brides in a Korean Immigrant Church in the U.S

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ABSTRACT

Literature on contemporary immigrants suggests that increasing transnational practices foster agency construction across borders, thereby disjoining geographical space and social space in which identities are constructed and negotiated. While studies pay increasing attention to the linkage between the transnational organizing of economic, political, and cultural activities among immigrant groups with a high level of transnationalism, relatively less attention has been given to the identity construction of immigrant groups without a high level of transnationalism. This study examines the agency dynamics among non-mobile immigrants who develop their agency by creating and negotiating boundaries through identity management practices in the wave of transnationalism that occurs in an immigrant church. Based on focus group interviews with fifteen Korean military brides and participant observation in a Mid-Western Korean immigrant church, the study revealed that through a new social space, Korean military brides not only created a more exclusive, closed, and homogeneous community within a Korean community, but their community becomes broader with comprehensive "imagined communities." This study also suggested that as non-mobile transnational immigrants, this effort is part of their gradual adaptation as well as resistance to assimilation to the wave of transnationalism that makes Korean immigrant communities in the U.S. noticeably transform various structural transformations.

Keywords: Transnationalism, Collective agency, Symbolic boundary, Identity management.

INTRODUCTION

The traditional concept of immigrant identity, based on assimilation theory, viewed immigrants as individuals uprooted from their home country, settling and integrating into a new one [46] [12] [48]. This framework has shifted in recent decades, with newer approaches emphasizing the construction of multi-local and multi-cultural identities. Among these is the transnational perspective, which posits that migration is not a one-time event but an ongoing process [13] [32] [51]. Immigrants maintain social, economic, and cultural ties to their host and origin countries, engaging in life patterns across borders. Much research has shown that many U.S. immigrants build their identities within "transnational social fields," taking on roles and obligations in both societies [17] [32]. These transnational migrants, described as having "feet in two countries," create connections between multiple nation-states, shaping their identities through networks that span borders [2] [25]. However, not all immigrants participate equally

in these transnational networks. Factors such as restrictive immigration policies, geographical distances, and economic barriers often limit some immigrants to more localized lives within the U.S. [20] [23]. Thus, it is plausible to think that these old and non-mobile immigrants can be different from those new and highly mobile immigrants in the way of managing their lives, such as creating and maintaining social and cultural space which is concomitant with their identification of social, ethnic, cultural status as a minority, the way of assimilating themselves to the host countries, and the way of building and maintaining ties with their countries of origin. Therefore, it is predictable that many ethnic social institutions may experience tension between non-mobile immigrants and transnational immigrants caused by those differences in the strategies of settlement [32], and one of the perfect institutions which are used to investigate these tensions is a religious institution because it is a significant social institution for migrants to build and maintain their identity as an ethnic group, their social status, and their culture.

Religious institutions play a critical role in shaping immigrant identities, particularly in transnational contexts. They offer immigrants a means to express their interests, maintain connections with their origin communities, and engage in collective activities that span borders. Religious participation also allows migrants to create transnational spaces, linking religious practices in the host country with those of their homelands. In this regard, religious communities have been considered vital agents in forming a transnational civil society [43].

Despite the growing body of research on transnationalism and identity, there has been limited focus on the role of immigrant religious institutions in shaping ethnic identity. Most studies have examined transnationalism from a "top-down" approach, exploring how religious institutions maintain social and cultural ties across borders [9] [49]. These studies often overlook the agency of individual church members and how they construct and maintain their collective identities in response to transnationalism.

By employing a "bottom-to-top" approach, this research will explore how everyday practices, relationships, and social interactions shape the collective identities of non-mobile immigrants [45]. The study will examine how non-mobile immigrants navigate the process of being "marked" within their church communities and how they create new social spaces that redefine their group identities in response to transnational influences [5]. This approach highlights the dynamic ways in which non-mobile immigrants maintain their cultural and religious identities despite limited engagement in transnational networks [21].

This study will also address this gap by focusing on non-mobile immigrants who do not actively engage in transnational networks. These immigrants, often highly acculturated to the dominant American culture, face unique challenges as their religious institutions undergo structural changes due to the influx of transnational resources. This research seeks to explore how these non-mobile church members build collective agencies and maintain their identities in response to the transformations within their religious institutions.

Based on these main research agendas, thus, the study will be divided into two main areas: First, it will examine the structural changes that occur in immigrant churches as they develop transnational networks, including changes in worship styles, religious activities, and organizational structures. Second, it will investigate how non-mobile church members adapt to these changes, focusing on the mechanisms they use to build collective agencies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Symbolic Boundary, Relationality, and Markedness

As mentioned, the current study explores how symbolic boundaries help shape collective identity among non-mobile church members amid institutional change and increased diversity. Focusing on "transnationalism from below," it investigates how these members, particularly those with limited mobility, develop a distinct collective identity as their church's demographics shift. The arrival of highly mobile transnational members who differ socially, economically, and culturally makes non-mobile members aware of symbolic boundaries, which are invisible lines defining groups based on similarities and differences.

The study emphasizes that non-mobile members' identity construction hinges on recognizing these symbolic boundaries, especially as they become more distinct due to diverse new members joining the church [34] [39]. This differentiation prompts non-mobile members to refine their collective identity, based on a sense of distinction from the newcomers. The process involves symbolic segmentation, or the separation of "us" and "them," which helps these members affirm their group's values and significance.

Symbolic boundaries, as defined by sociologists, are abstract yet potent distinctions used by social groups to classify and define relationships with others [30]. These boundaries affect how groups view each other, fostering a sense of belonging within the group and distinguishing it from others. Symbolic boundaries can eventually solidify into social boundaries—concrete divides such as class or race distinctions—when they are widely accepted within society [19].

The study draws on Bourdieu's concept of "distinction," where cultural practices and tastes reinforce class boundaries. Dominant groups validate their culture as superior, marking it as a means of maintaining privilege and excluding others [4]. This phenomenon is reflected in the church, where non-mobile members use symbolic boundaries to assert their cultural identity against that of the new transnational members. Through practices and tastes, these symbolic boundaries help establish a sense of collective agency, where non-mobile members solidify their status and identity within the church.

Moreover, relationality, or the sense of identity formed in relation to others, is essential for creating symbolic boundaries [37]. Non-mobile members define themselves not only by their values but also in contrast to the transnational members. This process of self-definition and identity assignment by others strengthens the group's identity and their sense of collective agency.

Markedness, or the perceived significance of certain group characteristics, further affects how collective identities form [7]. When identity management strategies lead members to perceive themselves as "marked" or distinctive within their environment, they become more conscious of their collective identity. For instance, non-mobile church members, especially those with mixed Korean-American heritage, feel marked against highly mobile members who may identify fully as Korean. As these transnational members grow in number and influence, the non-mobile members' marked status within the church becomes more apparent, prompting them to redefine their identity and strengthen their collective bonds.

The study aims to examine these dynamics among military brides, a group positioned between American and Korean cultural spheres. Their unique situation highlights how they feel marked and navigate their identity within the Korean and American communities. By focusing on this group, the research sheds light on how markedness and symbolic boundaries impact identity formation, particularly in increasingly diverse and transnational settings.

Collective Agency and Collective Identity Construction

This research examines how military brides involved in a transforming church community develop and maintain a collective identity amidst significant structural changes. It investigates the factors that drive their need to construct this identity and the methods they use to sustain it.

Past research on collective identity highlights the active role of members in shaping their identity, especially when structural shifts challenge their social standing [8] [15]. Scholars argue that collective agencies emerge when members reflect on their shared situation, enabling them to influence the structures around them, rather than simply conforming to external changes [33]. Giddens' "structuration theory" supports this view, positing a dynamic relationship between agency and structure, where individuals both follow established norms and initiate actions that reshape these norms [16]. According to this theory, actors use resources and rules within their social environments to reproduce or alter social structures.

This agency is strengthened when actors face shifts in their social context, prompting them to redefine goals, identities, and collective strategies. The "spiritual marketplace" described by Roof, for instance, reflects how religious identity has become more personalized in modern society, necessitating agency to adapt to shifting cultural and spiritual landscapes [42].

A "sense of urgency" often fuels this agency. When members perceive immediate challenges—such as changes in church demographics due to new, mobile transnational members—they become more driven to reaffirm their group identity [22] [11]. Bourdieu's concept of urgency reflects how this sense of immediacy leads people to act strategically within their social framework [4]. This urgency can be particularly pronounced when a group feels marginalized due to the distinct social, economic, and cultural characteristics of the incoming members [14] [41].

The current study hypothesizes that the increasing presence of transnational members in the church intensifies the non-mobile members' need to strengthen their identity. The transnational members' significant social, economic, and cultural influence reshapes the church environment, making the non-mobile members feel isolated. To counter this, they develop collective agencies as a means of protecting their social standing within the church. This collective agency manifests either a blending of identities to lessen perceived marginalization or as a bolstering of unique traits to establish a clear group identity.

Sharing collective memories and perspectives is also vital for sustaining this agency [38] [3]. Snow and Benford discuss how "framing" plays a key role in social movements, as members create a common narrative that strengthens their identity [47]. This shared history and understanding of social structures help the group interpret its position and define its role in response to institutional changes. Lamont notes that shared meaning, rooted in a group's

unique experiences, fosters strong symbolic boundaries that further affirm collective identity [29].

Building on these insights, the study examines how military brides navigate their social and cultural spaces to form a collective identity. It explores how they create distinct spaces within the church and maintain their influence, even as their community structure evolves. This process involves establishing their own social, cultural, and religious boundaries to safeguard and express their collective identity. The study thus seeks to understand how military brides, as part of a marginalized group, preserve their agency and contribute to their community's ongoing transformation.

METHOD

Sample and Data

This study investigates the structural transformation within a Korean ethnic church in the U.S., the Vision Korean Baptist Church (VKBC), and the coping mechanisms developed by a unique subset of its members, Korean military brides. Initially, the focus was on transnationalism's impact on VKBC at a micro level exploring how Korean military brides maintained their identities in an increasingly translocal and fluid church environment despite preserving their identity as non-mobile church members. The study aims to reveal how these brides create and uphold symbolic boundaries through cultural and religious practices, distinguishing themselves from other Koreans and managing their interactions with newer, more transnational migrants.

VKBC was selected due to its dual role for Korean military brides: it serves both as a religious institution and a social space. Besides spiritual support, the church offers a communal environment where members can engage in cultural practices, such as speaking Korean and enjoying traditional food, fostering a sense of identity. For military brides, VKBC functions as an ethnic "village," providing a place of belonging and identity reinforcement amidst marginalization in broader Korean and American societies. The church helps them construct a sense of "markedness," offering relief from the inferiority often experienced due to racial and ethnic differences.

VKBC's unique setting—a small Midwestern town—distinguishes it from other Korean immigrant churches commonly found in larger cities. It has undergone considerable structural changes due to an influx of transnational migrants, including students and temporary visitors, who contrast with the older immigrant population that is more acculturated to American society. While many studies of Korean immigrant churches focus on organizational structures, few have examined the social interactions and identity negotiations occurring at the congregational level [27] [52] [45] [35]. This study fills that gap, addressing how Korean military brides interact within VKBC and maintain their cultural identity against a backdrop of shifting church demographics.

Previous research has often overlooked the experiences of Korean military brides, primarily studying larger urban churches where old immigrants with socio-cultural roots in Korean communities predominantly reside [24] [37]. However, Korean military brides, often isolated in rural areas due to their proximity to U.S. military bases, face unique challenges. Since the 1950s, nearly 90,000 Korean women have immigrated to the U.S. as military brides, moving to

diverse and often isolated areas where they may be the only Korean or Asian individuals in their community (Yuh, 1999; Kim, H. J., 1991). Studies focused on urban areas with dense Korean populations may fail to capture the experiences of these women who navigate both Korean and American identities.

This research on VKBC, a smaller immigrant church with a notable population of Korean military brides, aims to highlight issues previously neglected by studies that focused mainly on urban Korean immigrant communities. Through this setting, the study delves into the cultural and social practices that military brides employ to manage their identities and interactions within VKBC, particularly as the congregation transforms due to an influx of more mobile, transnational members. In doing so, it addresses the broader implications of community and identity in immigrant religious institutions.

Research Design

This study examines the structural transformation in an immigrant church and its impact on non-transnational church members, focusing specifically on 15 Korean military brides. Conducted between June and July 2023, the research employed focus group interviews, a method within qualitative research designed to gather diverse perspectives through organized group discussions. This approach helps researchers understand participants' shared experiences and the influence of group dynamics, making it ideal for exploring complex social phenomena like the integration of transnationalism within a traditionally local church setting. The study's design involved careful selection of participants who had a shared church affiliation more than 20 years and firsthand experience of how a tremendous structural transitions occurred through the influx of highly mobile transnational church members who contributed to introduce the home-church principle. The interviews were structured around two open-ended questions: one addressing the reasons why the participants built their agency to respond to the church's structural transformation, and the other exploring how they collectively adapted to these changes within the Korean ethnic church in the U.S. Focus group interviews were preferred over quantitative methods because they allow for the collection of emotional responses, attitudes, and beliefs within a social context. This group setting encourages participants to express multiple views and undergo emotional processing as they interact with others facing similar experiences.

According to Kreuger (1988), focus groups are valuable for understanding not just what is significant to participants, but why those aspects matter. The interactions within focus groups reveal differences between stated beliefs and actual behaviors, thus providing multiple interpretations of participants' attitudes. However, assembling focus groups can be challenging, as participants may be hesitant to share sensitive information in group settings. In this study, however, the Korean military brides' shared backgrounds and close relationships facilitated open communication, overcoming this common barrier in focus group research.

The focus group setup requires extensive planning to ensure a neutral and comfortable setting. Researchers suggest that groups ideally consist of six to ten participants, though some studies allow up to 15 (Goss & Leinbach, 1996). This research included a single group of 15 participants, with each session lasting around 2.5 hours. The church itself was chosen as the research site, leveraging participants' familiarity with space to create a neutral environment

(Powell et al., 1996). This familiar setting helped participants feel at ease, fostering open dialogue and the honest sharing of experiences.

Selecting suitable participants posed its own challenges, as heterogeneity among members can hinder the flow of discussion, while excessive homogeneity might limit diverse opinions (Kreuger, 1988). For this reason, the researcher focused on balancing these aspects to form a group with high levels of intimacy and shared experiences, ensuring that all members felt comfortable. In this study, participants were recruited primarily by word of mouth and through existing social networks, which proved effective in identifying individuals whose profiles aligned with the study's objectives.

This carefully structured focus group process set the stage for understanding how Korean military brides, as non-mobile church members, interpreted and responded to changes in their church.

FINDINGS

From Urgency to Agency: The Impetus and the Collective Agency

The VKBC military brides, a unique group within their VKBC church community, felt a pressing need to assert their collective identity as structural changes within VKBC left them increasingly isolated. These changes, including the adoption of the home-church principle and an influx of highly mobile transnational members, reshaped the social and cultural landscape of VKBC. Faced with these shifts, the military brides felt marked and marginalized, which propelled them to develop a distinct collective agency to preserve their identity and rebuild their community ties.

The VKBC underwent profound structural changes, primarily due to the adoption of the home-church principle, a move that introduced a more horizontal, democratic governance style. For the military brides, this shift represented a significant disruption to the church's previous structure, which had provided formal roles and a clear leadership hierarchy that allowed them to feel a sense of purpose and value. Traditionally, these roles afforded the military brides the chance to engage deeply in community life, maintain connections, and affirm their identity. However, the democratization of church governance diminished these leadership positions, which had once been a source of recognition and worth for the brides. This shift devalued their contributions and made it harder for them to feel as significant within VKBC.

The adoption of the home-church principle in 2016 further transformed the church's activities. Whereas VKBC once organized structured, formal events that fostered community ties, the new model encouraged informal interactions among members, aside from core gatherings like Sunday services and weekly mok-jang¹ meetings. For the military brides, these changes meant fewer structured opportunities to interact and build relationships with other members. As the church's social structure became less formalized, the brides felt increasingly distant from the broader VKBC community, intensifying their sense of isolation. These structural changes also reduced the spatial and temporal settings in which the brides could openly express and maintain their Korean identity. For many of these women, VKBC served as a "Korean ghetto"—a unique space where they could perform their identity as Koreanness, but the new environment

¹ *Mok-jang* is comparable to a cell-group in the home-church principle.

limited these opportunities, making them feel an urgency to band together and assert their collective identity.

This sense of urgency was heightened by the arrival of highly mobile transnational members who quickly became the majority within VKBC. These newcomers brought with them distinctive social, economic, and cultural backgrounds that set them apart from the established military brides. Their presence created a new social boundary within the church, one that was highly visible and salient. In comparison to the small, close-knit group of military brides, the transnational members reshaped the church environment with their different experiences and flexible approach to identity. The sheer number of newcomers rapidly expanded this boundary, which left the military brides feeling marginalized. As the transnational members grew in numbers and influence, the brides' relatively small group found it increasingly difficult to maintain their voice within VKBC, exacerbating their sense of exclusion.

One key difference between the two groups lay in the way they expressed their Korean identity. The military brides were often described as "Korean commuters," meaning they expressed their identity only in specific settings or moments. On the other hand, the highly mobile members, referred to as "Korean lifestyleers,"[6] embraced a more fluid expression of their Koreanness, integrating it into a variety of situations and contexts. This difference added another layer of complexity to the military brides' experience, as their selective approach to cultural expression contrasted sharply with the adaptable, ever-present style adopted by the newcomers. The military brides' relatively limited socio-economic resources and traditional approach to church and community life further distinguished them within VKBC, amplifying their sense of isolation.

These growing divisions were not only social but also had implications for the brides' ethnic and cultural identity within VKBC. Their reserved, traditional style of expressing Koreanness and practicing their faith made them appear increasingly out of place in an environment that was becoming dominated by members who were more flexible and informal in their practices. This divergence in identity and practice made the military brides feel marked within the church, as though they stood out in ways that left them vulnerable to exclusion. Mrs. Bugelli, a notable figure among the military brides, voiced the group's sentiment by highlighting the importance of creating a separate organization to protect their collective identity:

I really hate to see those changes in VKBC because I feel more unworthy after I experienced all the changes in VKBC. Those new people seem to be so outstanding because they are rich, they have a good job in Korea, their education is high, and they are higher than me in every aspect. But I'm really uncomfortable with the way they're treating me. Especially, they seem to think about me as American, not Korean. I know I'm not a full-time Korean because I have to spend most of my time doing something with my American husband or his family. I know I have to eat American food most of the time. I know I have to speak English for most of my life. But I'm Korean. This is absolutely true without any doubt. They seem to criticize me because I'm not a faithful Korean. But I always try to be Korean, and this is why I came to VKBC because I really want to get along with all kinds of Koreans. But I feel they don't want to have a good relationship with me. They seem to be indifferent and cold. That made me feel so sad and upset, but it also made me think about one question, the question of who am I? I really wanted to know who I was.

Her active role in organizing this new agency underscores the group's need to establish a safe, cohesive space that would allow them to resist the marginalizing effects of VKBC's evolving environment.

To counter these structural changes, the military brides initiated a collective agency, employing a range of strategies to establish a sense of solidarity and community. They focused on building connections with other internationally married Korean women who shared similar experiences. This strategic outreach provided them with an expanded support network that helped reinforce their distinct identity within VKBC. By fostering these connections, the brides built a collective identity resilient to the structural changes within VKBC. Their efforts allowed them to carve out a new space within the church, one where they could preserve their traditions, values, and religious practices without succumbing to the pressures of assimilation. The military brides' collective agency became a means to resist the homogenizing effects of VKBC's new structure. By continuing to uphold their traditional beliefs and customs, they asserted their identity in a church environment that was rapidly shifting. This process helped them to reconstruct a symbolic boundary around their group, one defined by cultural purity and simplicity. In focusing on shared ethnic, social, and cultural characteristics, they fostered a collective identity that stood apart from the influence of the transnational majority, enabling them to preserve a sense of belonging that aligned with their values.

Ultimately, the VKBC military brides' collective agency underscored their resilience and adaptability in response to structural marginalization. Their story demonstrates how a group can transform a sense of urgency into a cohesive, organized effort to reclaim identity and purpose within a community. Their actions serve as a powerful example of how collective agency can create spaces of belonging and solidarity, even in settings where individuals feel excluded or overshadowed by broader social changes.

By organizing around shared experiences and values, the military brides not only protected their cultural identity but also affirmed the strength and resilience of community bonds. Through their journey, they reveal how marginalized groups can navigate and even reshape the spaces they inhabit, preserving their identity and asserting their value in an interconnected and evolving world.

A Group for Themselves: The General Pattern of Building a Community and the Case of VKBC Military Brides

The narrative of Korean military brides forming communities in the United States provides insights into the ways in which these women built informal support networks in an unfamiliar environment. The experience of Mrs. Bugelli, who moved to the U.S. in 1967, highlights the initial isolation faced by many Korean brides in America. Shortly after arriving, her father-in-law introduced her to another Korean woman who had married an American. This encounter brought immense joy to Mrs. Bugelli, illustrating the relief and comfort that came from connecting with someone from her homeland. However, her new friend's life was busy with work and family, making regular interaction challenging. They eventually lost contact, and it wasn't until the 1980s that Mrs. Bugelli had significant contact with other Koreans through the VKBC community.

This example reflects the broader trend of how military brides sought connections with fellow Koreans despite the scarcity of Korean communities during the 1950s and 1960s. Many women were so immersed in American society and committed to family obligations that they had limited time for socializing. Furthermore, some Koreans in America, such as students from affluent backgrounds, perceived military brides as uneducated or lower class, leading to a certain degree of social distance. Despite these obstacles, the desire to connect with other Koreans remained strong.

Korean military brides often relied on sympathetic spouses or in-laws to help them establish connections. In other instances, chance encounters at workplaces or public places led to new friendships. Mrs. Crispin, for example, shared how she would sometimes buy items from a Chinese grocery store due to the lack of Korean stores in her area. She recounted how she would look for other Koreans while shopping, sometimes purposefully bumping her cart into someone she thought might be Korean, initiating conversations that, at times, led to friendships. This reflects the extent to which these women were willing to go to find connections with their compatriots.

The immigration law changes in 1965 marked a turning point for Korean military brides, as they facilitated a larger influx of Korean immigrants to the U.S., making it easier for military brides to find other Koreans. Many of these women, due to their husbands' military assignments, moved frequently, which allowed them to meet Koreans across various locations. The increasing population of Korean immigrants during the 1970s led to the formation of more substantial networks and, in some cases, formal organizations. The VKBC community exemplifies one such organization, founded in 1985 with efforts from both Korean students and military brides. The group relied on personal connections to recruit new members initially, with growth remaining steady but moderate until early 2010s, when more highly mobile individuals started attending the church. The supportive, inclusive environment at VKBC enabled the military brides to feel comfortable and integrated with the wider Korean community, and they did not feel marginalized. Rather, the homogeneity of VKBC allowed for a shared identity as Koreans, rather than differentiating themselves as military brides or Korean Americans.

As VKBC grew and more members joined, the military brides felt a renewed sense of community. They were able to forge friendships, support each other, and affirm their identity as Koreans. The presence of a larger Korean community allowed them to maintain a cultural identity that felt typical and connected to their heritage. It was only when the demographic of VKBC shifted with the influx of highly mobile individuals that the military brides felt the need to create their own symbolic boundaries within the organization. This need for a more distinct identity led them to build a separate agency and redefine their collective identity within a different formal structure, as detailed in subsequent parts of the VKBC narrative. Through their involvement in VKBC, Korean military brides could create a community that acknowledged their shared experiences, thereby reinforcing a sense of sisterhood based on both their Korean heritage and unique status as military brides.

Building an Organization: Foundation and Development of Community

The formation of the Korean American Wives Association (KAWA) was a response to the growing marginalization felt by Korean military brides within their community at VKBC. With

an increasing number of highly mobile members entering VKBC, the military brides—often viewed as “half-Koreans” by these newcomers—felt pressured to create their own support system. Simultaneously, despite their efforts to adapt to American life, they were still often perceived as outsiders, or “half-Americans.” Mrs. Crispin, a founding member of a Korean military bride organization explained:

It's hard to associate with Americans, they call us Oriental, Oriental girl, and this and that, but if we try to get involved in Korean communities in VKBC or another communal setting in this town, then more Korean people label us as internationally married women and say this and that about us, so there's no place for us to go. So, that's why this organization started.

This dual sense of being “in-between” spurred them to establish an organization where they could reclaim their identity and find acceptance.

KAWA held its first meeting in 2016 with 15 VKBC members. Over time, it expanded to include 42 members from surrounding areas, bringing together Korean women married to American men, both military and civilian. Originally, its membership included only military brides, but as the group grew, civilian spouses joined, broadening its scope. Mrs. Kingston, a founding member, explained that the idea for KAWA emerged when VKBC was rapidly adopting the home-church principle in the early 2010s, transforming the church environment. As these transformations unfolded, military brides began to feel further isolated and marginalized within VKBC, a space they had once felt part of. Thus, KAWA was formed to create a dedicated space for military brides to affirm their identities and support one another.

Recruitment for KAWA primarily relied on personal networks, with founding members reaching out to others they knew who also felt marginalized in their communities. The organization soon became a means for military brides to realize they were neither powerless nor isolated; rather, they were connected to a wider network of Korean women with similar experiences across the United States. As KAWA strengthened and built relationships with other similar organizations, these women found that their community was not bound to one physical location. Through KAWA, military brides could maintain their identity as Koreans not only in specific, local spaces like VKBC but across a wider “imagined community” of Korean American military brides throughout the country [1].

Borrowing from the concept of “imagined communities,” KAWA became a network based not on direct, daily interactions but on shared experiences as Korean women married to American men. Even though members did not necessarily know one another personally, they felt connected by their common status. This shared sense of community fostered a broader identity, transcending physical spaces and enabling military brides to interact with one another across the country, united by their common experiences and cultural roots. KAWA provided a platform for these women to create a “Korean ghetto” that was not confined to a single area but spanned various locations, allowing them to sustain their Korean identity within this wide-reaching network.

Unlike VKBC, which had become increasingly diverse and complex due to the presence of transnational members, KAWA offered a more homogenous environment. VKBC's diversity in gender, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds made it harder for military brides to feel

connected as part of a unified group. The influx of highly mobile members brought new symbolic boundaries that left the military brides feeling marked and marginalized. In contrast, KAWA was centered on a shared experience of ethnicity, gender, and social status, allowing its members to connect in a way that transcended the stratification they faced in VKBC. With a more exclusive membership, KAWA fostered an environment where military brides could express themselves without feeling overshadowed or distinct from others.

However, as KAWA grew, the organization encountered internal challenges. Some members perceived the president as domineering, noting that she came from a well-connected background and was married to a civilian professional, which may have contributed to a sense of superiority over military wives with less formal education or from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Mrs. Kingston, reflecting on this, noted that while the president was highly intelligent, her lack of social skills and inability to relate to the group's diverse members created friction:

Some people came because they did not like the sexism in Korea, some women had run away from home and become prostitutes and met an American Yankee and came that way, ... some people met at the PX or the commissary. So, there are all kinds of people in this organization. But the smart ones are smart, so the members sometimes think the president is really different from them. So, they started to challenge because those military brides decided to join this organization to have some kind of comfort feeling and some community feeling ... As I told you, many Korean military brides including me need to feel we are also decent Koreans because we are still treated like different Koreans, not decent but substandard human beings by many Koreans in this church or this town ... I know it's true that those internationally married women were all Yankee whores, they've never been educated. A bunch of ignorant and crass women got together to join this organization. But they have to experience this kind of treatment by some decent internationally married Koreans in this organization, what else can you expect from them? That's how Korean society sees us, that's their perspective. They do, of course, they can do. I think they should do. So, in the end, I became the president, and we enjoyed quite a boom. I think because of my status, most of the members seemed to feel more comfortable.

Based on this reflection, it seemed that military brides were disappointed and desperate because they had joined KAWA to escape judgment and exclusion but eventually encountered similar biases within the organization. They expected mutual respect and solidarity in KAWA, and tensions around respect emerged as members tried to establish a supportive environment that honored each woman's background.

These internal conflicts also revealed distinctions among Korean women married to American men, highlighting a divide between those married to servicemen and those married to civilian professionals. Military brides—often from different social and economic backgrounds—joined KAWA seeking companionship and shared understanding. However, some civilian wives saw themselves as distinct from and occasionally superior to military wives, viewing them as uneducated or needing guidance. This perception of superiority created tensions, leading some civilian wives to step down from leadership roles or leave the organization altogether. Over time, KAWA became predominantly a group of military brides, forming a solidarity centered on shared experiences as military spouses rather than a broader category of “internationally married women.”

Although KAWA expanded its network nationally through “imagined communities” that connected Korean American military brides across the country, direct, personal interactions remained essential. Face-to-face encounters provided the foundation for this sense of community, as women could bond over shared experiences and reinforce their collective identity. These personal interactions were the basis of KAWA’s success, enabling military brides to feel part of a community larger than themselves. Personal contact also reinforced their understanding of their shared identity as military spouses, helping them transcend individual circumstances to embrace a broader sense of belonging.

Despite the growth of KAWA, however, the sense of unity within the organization was not without limitations. Racial boundaries persisted, affecting the sense of solidarity among members. For instance, some Korean women married to African American soldiers found themselves excluded from KAWA. Mrs. Goldin, a Korean woman married to an African American soldier, observed that despite knowing KAWA’s founding members, she was not invited to join. Among the women interviewed, most women married to white men associated with others who were similarly married, while those married to Black men often formed separate connections. Exceptions occurred only when women shared similar class backgrounds or when someone in a higher social position reached out to those from different racial or class backgrounds.

These racial boundaries among KAWA members were often reflective of racial divisions imposed by American society, particularly in the military environment where racial hierarchies were more pronounced. Military brides often encountered pressure to observe racial boundaries, both within American communities and in the military setting. For example, one woman noted that her white husband disapproved of her associating with another Korean woman whose husband was Black. Such pressures influenced the social dynamics within KAWA, making some women feel marked by their racial associations and leading those married to Black men to eventually withdraw from the organization [6]. Consequently, KAWA became a more homogeneous group, not only in terms of ethnicity and gender but also regarding race and class, solidifying a community based on shared socioeconomic and cultural experiences.

In conclusion, KAWA served as a vital space for Korean military brides to affirm their identities and create a community based on mutual support. Although it faced challenges related to internal hierarchy and racial dynamics, KAWA allowed these women to establish a network that reinforced their cultural identity and provided a sense of belonging. Through this organization, military brides could redefine their identity on their own terms, moving beyond the limitations they faced in mainstream society and within VKBC. Ultimately, KAWA became a sanctuary for military brides, fostering a solidarity rooted in shared experience and collective resilience.

A Cause of Building Organization: The Goal of the Organization

As KAWA, the Korean American Wives Association, grew and became a more formal organization, founding members recognized the need for a clearly defined purpose to unite its members beyond social gatherings. This goal was set around building a strong sense of community, focusing on high levels of solidarity and a collective identity among Korean military brides. The aim was to foster a supportive environment where members would feel valued not

as individuals with a marginalized “in-between” identity but as part of a respected, cohesive group.

To strengthen this sense of community, KAWA initiated several annual events including a yearly vacation and a holiday party. The vacation provided the women with a chance to connect and relax in a setting devoted to them, while the holiday party, which included family and friends, fostered a sense of pride and visibility within their extended social circles. Additionally, KAWA hosted fundraisers, which allowed the group to promote a positive image of Korean military brides to the public, both among Americans and Koreans. These events helped convey that KAWA members were not isolated or marginalized but instead formed a vital, stable group that contributed to both American and Korean communities.

KAWA also served practical purposes that directly supported its members’ daily lives. Members frequently shared job information, helping each other secure employment by passing on references and connections. For instance, when a member left a job, she would often recommend another military bride to fill her position, ensuring organizational stability. Beyond work, members often assisted each other with childcare and shared homemade meals, strengthening bonds through mutual support. Seasonal job opportunities, another frequent topic of discussion, were shared and spread among members, providing economic opportunities that helped alleviate financial pressures. Through these activities, KAWA’s members nurtured a community built by shared ethnicity, gender, and life experiences, creating practical ties that deepened their sense of belonging.

The activities KAWA organized also reflected members’ desire to define their identity and give it back to their communities. Recognizing the unique challenges military brides often faced in the United States, the women sought to assist others who might be struggling, demonstrating empathy for others in similar situations. Members were particularly invested in supporting Korean orphans, especially “Amerasian” children, who shared some of the cultural and identity challenges they themselves experienced. To fund this cause, KAWA held monthly fundraising events, where every member contributed dues to support orphanages in Korea. By engaging in charitable work, KAWA’s members highlighted their commitment to helping others, affirming that their unique status did not lessen their worth but rather enhanced their ability to make a meaningful impact.

This choice of activities demonstrated that KAWA members acknowledged their distinct identity, setting themselves apart from both mainstream Korean immigrants and Americans. Through these efforts, they asserted their identity not as fully American or fully Korean, but as Korean American military brides—a unique identity they grew to embrace with pride. KAWA’s supportive structure and exclusive membership, centered on shared ethnicity and experiences, helped the women feel “unmarked” within their group. Unlike in other social settings, they didn’t feel the need to draw distinctions to assert their identity. Instead, KAWA’s homogeneity provided a space where they could celebrate their shared identity without feeling marginalized or defined by differences.

In creating and sustaining KAWA, the Korean military brides found a platform for collective agency, allowing them to shape a positive, empowered identity as Korean American military brides. This sense of solidarity and shared purpose fortified their community, offering a stable

support network where they could thrive and contribute confidently, both within their own circles and in society at large.

A Cause of Building Organization: The Goal of the Organization

As discussed, the Korean American Wives Association (KAWA) emerged as a vital space for Korean military brides seeking a sense of community and belonging. Initially rooted in VKBC, their Korean immigrant church, KAWA was formed to help these women build a supportive network as they navigated life as Korean wives of American servicemen. In 2015, VKBC constructed a new building called the All Nations Center (ANC), a place that became a tangible setting for KAWA meetings and activities. Through the establishment of KAWA, these women created a “social space” where they could transform shared cultural experiences and struggles into collective identity and solidarity.

Having their own designated space at ANC became essential for fostering the close-knit community KAWA members desired. Mrs. Vaughn, one of KAWA’s founders, emphasized the importance of a space where members could openly talk and share their experiences with others who understood them.

I was lonely. I always think I’m Korean because I eat Korean food, and I speak Korean as they do. But they didn’t accept me as a Korean. There was no way for me to approach them. So, some brides like me decided to establish KAWA. But first, we needed space for ourselves. In this space, we can do Korean things with other Korean women. I mean we can speak Korean, eat Korean food, and exchange some practical and emotional matters. So, many members can’t come to VKBC because they live far away from here, but most of them come to our bi-weekly association meeting. So, I think this space is meant to be a physical space as well as some invisible space. I mean a space in our mind. I mean something like a comfort zone.

For many military brides, the massive influx of highly mobile members into VKBC after the adoption of the home-church model had left them feeling alienated. Despite their attempts to integrate with new members, they often found themselves excluded, which underscored the need for a community where they could express themselves freely and affirm their identity as Korean women.

Food also played a critical role in KAWA’s community-building efforts. For KAWA members, preparing and sharing Korean food became a way to celebrate their heritage and reconnect with aspects of Korean womanhood that were often unappreciated in their American families. At gatherings, women would bring traditional dishes like Korean barbecue, kimchi stew, dumplings, and other homemade specialties, creating a banquet-like atmosphere that allowed them to enjoy and display their culinary skills. Some members even joked about “stocking up” on Korean food, as many of their husbands did not allow it at home due to its distinctive taste and smell. These gatherings became moments to express cultural pride and indulge in familiar comforts that were difficult to maintain in everyday life.

For the women of KAWA, Korean food symbolized more than just sustenance. It was a means of connecting with their cultural identity and their roots, a shared ritual that provided them with emotional comfort. As they shared meals, they also shared stories of their childhoods in Korea, their family traditions, and the memories tied to their food. During one gathering, a

member reminisced about her mother teaching her to make pretty dumplings, a memory other women also recognized and connected with, reinforcing their bonds through collective memories. This act of sharing familiar food, stories, and traditions enabled them to affirm their identity as Korean women, not merely as military brides and created a shared history that transcended individual experiences.

Beyond food, language was another essential element in strengthening KAWA's community. The Korean language dominated their bi-weekly meetings, allowing members to express themselves fully and honestly. For some older members who had limited formal education in Korean due to colonial policies, speaking Korean at these gatherings was both a learning experience and a reaffirmation of their cultural identity. One woman, who had learned Korean only later in life, expressed pride in her ability to speak it at KAWA meetings. Another member was delighted when she found herself immersed in a Korean-speaking environment for the first time in decades, experiencing the language as a part of her everyday life and rediscovering the ease and familiarity of speaking in her native tongue.

The emphasis on using Korean in KAWA meetings also provided a way for the women to express their "real inside selves," as Mrs. Vaughn put it.

[English] is also important for my daily life in my American home because I need to talk with my family ... As you know, everyone except me is American. Even all of my children aren't interested in learning Korean. They always said I have to be an American because our family is all Americans. I totally agree with them. I know this is America, so everybody should be able to read and write English. And this is more critical because almost everything around me is something American. So, if I don't act like an American, they may not think I'm not their mom or wife ... So, having fluent English is so important because I think I have to be an American. I mean I'm naturally a Korean, but I'm also used to being an American.

Although English was often necessary for day-to-day interactions, they felt that speaking Korean better conveyed their true thoughts and feelings, especially in a group setting with shared cultural backgrounds. The women inserted English words only when needed for clarity, but the meetings remained predominantly Korean, fostering an environment where members could relate on a deeply personal level. Through the intentional use of language and cultural practices, KAWA members reaffirmed their identities, creating a space where they could express themselves without feeling the pressure to conform to American expectations.

KAWA's community-building efforts also extended to charitable work, particularly in support of Korean orphans, many of whom were "Amerasian" children. This cause resonated deeply with members, as it related to the unique struggles they faced in balancing Korean and American identities. Monthly dues were collected to fundraise for orphanages in Korea, a gesture that allowed members to contribute positively to their heritage and support those facing similar identity struggles. By engaging in charitable activities that aligned with their own lives, KAWA members reinforced their distinct identity within the broader Korean American landscape.

In their pursuit of community, KAWA members experienced a mix of comfort and conflict in defining their identity. They found joy in reconnecting with their Korean heritage through

shared meals, language, and memories, yet faced ongoing cultural conflicts with their American spouses. Conversations often shifted from lighthearted reminiscence to reflections on the differences between Korean and American cultural values. While they honored Korean traditions and ideals, they also acknowledged the reality of adapting to American customs in their family lives. The dissonance between their upbringing and their current realities was a recurring theme, as many members realized they were straddling two identities—part Korean, and part American.

In their discussions, KAWA members became increasingly aware of their position as “in-between” individuals, neither fully American nor entirely Korean. This midpoint identity was shaped by their unique experiences as military brides, who adapted to American life yet maintained a deep-rooted connection to Korean culture. Mrs. Peterson also expressed a similar view while mentioning her feelings about being in the KAWA meeting:

So, practicing something American is so important for me because it overwhelms my life here. I mean it's so important for me to show my family I'm comfortable eating American food and speaking English. Actually, I got used to it even if I often feel hungry for Korean food and speaking Korean. So, I think I'm not a pure Korean but an “impure Korean.” I'd thought I could be a Korean like many Korean immigrants in VKBC, but I knew I couldn't because I realized there was a big gap between me and them in this church. I know we are all Korean ethnically, but we are different in many ways. That's why I try to come to KAWA events because I feel much more comfortable being in KAWA meetings than being with other Korean immigrants in VKBC. After all, everybody in the KAWA meeting is the same as me. Like them, I'm in a position where they can or have to be an American and a Korean. So, that's why I always come to this meeting because I can talk about my life situation. After all, no Korean immigrant in VKBD can imagine my situation because they are just Koreans. But I'm not. I'm a Korean American military bride. I'm a person who is in a murky situation. I have to entertain my family proving I'm an American like them. But I think I'm Korean. I was born with Korean blood. So, it's natural to express my Koreanness, but I can't be a full-Korean like those Korean immigrants in VKBC because I feel I'm also an American. So, I'm comfortable with doing something in this meeting because I don't think I have to tone down my unique life condition. I mean I can tone up my Americanness, and at the same time, I can also freely express my Koreanness. So, as a true Korean, I try to attend every VKBC and KAWA meeting not to forget my Koreanness, but I also try to act like an American because most of my life is surrounded by American things.

For many, building a sense of community within KAWA reinforced their understanding that both Korean and American influences were integral to their identity. While KAWA provided a space for them to connect with their Korean heritage, their American experiences were equally important to their personal and social development.

Ultimately, KAWA served as a powerful collective agency for Korean military brides, helping them navigate life in a way that honored their dual identities. Through food, language, shared experiences, and community support, these women created a haven where they could celebrate their Korean roots while adapting to their American surroundings. Though challenges and tensions persisted, KAWA offered its members a unique platform to forge a shared identity and find belonging within a cultural blend that was distinctly their own.

We Are Not a Group of Koreans But a Group of American Military Brides: From a Pure Identity to a Mixed Identity

The formation of KAWA, the Korean American Wives Association, transformed the identity of Korean military brides in VKBC. Initially, these women grappled with their “in-between” status, feeling marginalized both as “half-Koreans” by their own community and as “half-Americans” in U.S. society. KAWA gave them the space to accept and define this dual identity on their own terms, embracing the blend of Korean and American influences that shaped their lives. Through regular meetings and community-building efforts, KAWA became a platform where members could confidently express both Koreanness and Americanness, a contrast to the purely Korean identity they performed in VKBC.

As described, the military brides felt pressure to focus solely on their Korean identity, concealing the American aspects of their lives to fit in with other church members in VKBC. However, in KAWA, they felt comfortable acknowledging the influence of American culture. Members like Mrs. Peterson spoke of how KAWA allowed them to reconcile their mixed identities rather than suppress one part of themselves. This space encouraged them to embrace both their roots and their current American lives, which was both a form of resistance against societal expectations and an assertion of their complex identities.

For many military brides, maintaining Korean citizenship served as a symbolic connection to their heritage, even though their lives and identities were rooted in the United States. Mrs. Pulaski, for example, found comfort in holding a Korean passport, as it reinforced her sense of origin, even if she had no plans to live in Korea again.

It's just, I'm Korean. I still have pride in being Korean. Because I love Korea. Why should I, why should a Korean become an American citizen? I had that kind of negative reaction, so I didn't. If I had wanted to, I would have already done it. But I still think that I have a destiny to live in the United States, and I feel so comfortable to live here. So, I think it's so convenient and beneficial for me not to lose my Korean citizenship while maintaining my Green Card.

Her choice to retain Korean citizenship while embracing life in the U.S. highlighted the women's desire to belong to both Korean and American communities, blending ties of origin and residence into a unique identity.

The discussion of identity among KAWA members often revolved around negotiation and resilience. Mrs. Mullen emphasized that being Korean was something inherently tied to birth and blood, regardless of where one lived. Despite adapting to American life, she remained deeply connected to her Korean heritage. Living in America for many years had made it feel like home, yet she maintained that her identity as Korean was unchangeable. Her sense of self was shaped by both cultural roots and residence, allowing her to belong to both Korean and American worlds without choosing one over the other.

This “in-between” identity was frequently described as a feeling of being “wanderer.” Mrs. Ferriman noted that she and others felt like they were drifting, as neither fully American nor fully Korean. Her language skills reflected this sense of limbo, with her English still limited and her Korean gradually fading. Yet rather than concealing this feeling of being “in-between,” the women in KAWA embraced it, acknowledging their duality as a source of strength rather than

a weakness. They recognized their membership in multiple communities, refusing to choose one over the other and accepting that their identity was both mixed and fluid.

For these military brides, involvement in KAWA made them “diluted Koreans” rather than “pure Koreans” [6]. In VKBC, they felt compelled to present themselves as entirely Korean, suppressing any American traits to fit into the church’s traditional expectations. However, KAWA’s environment allowed them to balance Koreanness and Americanness, making them feel less bound to maintain a purely Korean identity. While KAWA members still valued Korean culture, they were more comfortable expressing their American traits within this group, as they shared similar life experiences and were free from the pressures of traditional Korean expectations.

The shift toward a mixed identity in KAWA was evident in their actions and interactions. As “identity moderates,” they balanced Koreanness and Americanness, creating a blend that allowed them to navigate different social worlds without entirely conforming to either one. In VKBC, they maintained a “concentrated Korean” identity, conforming to the church’s cultural norms. In KAWA, however, they embraced a “diluted Korean” identity, confidently integrating American elements into their self-perception. This moderation helped them feel more comfortable in their dual identities, enabling them to express Koreanness without feeling obligated to suppress their Americanness.

Their collective agency in KAWA also opened new opportunities for community involvement. Many members took on roles as “civilian ambassadors” of Korean culture, participating in multicultural events to represent Korean heritage in the U.S. Wearing traditional attire, they showcased Korean foods like dumplings and barbecued beef, and displayed traditional Korean artifacts, allowing them to share their culture with American audiences. Because military brides accustomed to feeling marginalized, these events were rare chances to express their Koreanness openly and proudly in an American context, reinforcing their dual identity and building confidence in their unique status as Korean American military brides. Mrs. Morgan clearly indicated this point when she talked about her active involvement in KAWA activities.

I think I’m less likely to falter in performing Koreanness outside VKBC. I used to be a person who is sensitive to express my Koreanness in front of American people because I got often criticized by my husband. He really doesn’t appreciate Korean culture. So, he never tries to understand Korean culture. But you know ... our marital relationship is not horizontal but have some imbalance. He always dominates me in everything. So, that’s why I came to this church because I feel I’m Korean, so I think it’s natural to keep Koreanness, and VKBC was just a place for me to enjoy Korean cultural things. But since I joined KAWA, I have been more confident to express my Koreanness in any place. I feel flexible to express my Koreanness. I think I became more active to express my Americanness in Korean place and to express my Koreanness in American places. I know I’m still coward to show my Koreanness to my husbands and other family members, but I will try to get used to it.

Participation in KAWA also empowered members to challenge stereotypes about military brides. In interactions with other Korean immigrants, they sometimes subtly referenced their American connections, countering assumptions that military brides were helpless or dependent. Remarks about their American family members’ assistance with events or special

discounts subtly conveyed their social ties within American society. These statements allowed military brides to assert their place in American society while dispelling stereotypes that portrayed them as isolated or disadvantaged.

Ultimately, KAWA allowed these women to redefine Koreanness within a uniquely American context. By blending cultural elements from both identities, they created an adaptive identity that was distinctly Korean American. Their duality empowered them to engage confidently with American culture while honoring their Korean heritage, and it equipped them to act as cultural bridges within both American and Korean communities.

Through KAWA, military brides not only forged a supportive network but also redefined their own sense of identity. Their participation in the organization enabled them to embrace their duality and cultivate a space where both Koreanness and Americanness were valued. This new, blended identity was not merely a midpoint but a position of strength, enabling them to act as representatives of both cultures and contributing to a more complex understanding of identity that embraced both roots and current lives.

CONCLUSION

The formation of the Korean American Wives Association (KAWA) illustrates the collective agency of military brides within Vision Korean Baptist Church (VKBC), who responded to the structural transformation of their church. This transformation was marked by the influx of highly mobile, transnational members, which shifted VKBC toward a more diverse, “translocal” church community. This change heightened the military brides’ awareness of social boundaries within VKBC, prompting them to create a separate space in KAWA. They envisioned this organization as a supportive community specifically for Korean women sharing similar experiences, social backgrounds, and ethnic ties.

The military brides’ collective action in establishing KAWA allowed them to create distinct “Korean ghettos” or spaces where they could express their cultural identity freely, separate from the increasingly heterogeneous environment of VKBC. Unlike VKBC, which had expanded to include a variety of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, KAWA retained a more homogeneous membership based on shared gender, ethnicity, and social status. This solidarity fostered a strong sense of community among KAWA members, who felt free to express their Koreanness in ways that VKBC’s growing diversity had made challenging.

KAWA’s influence also extended beyond VKBC through the concept of “imagined communities” [1]. By connecting with other Korean military brides across the United States, KAWA built a network of shared cultural spaces that transcended geographic limitations. This network empowered KAWA members to express their Korean identity across different contexts, unrestricted by physical location. While VKBC’s local focus confined expressions of Koreanness to specific settings, KAWA’s reach allowed its members to maintain a sense of identity that was flexible and adaptable to various social environments.

Initially, the military brides managed their identity with a high degree of flexibility, shifting between American and Korean social worlds depending on their setting. In VKBC, they intensified their expression of Koreanness to match the church’s expectations, while in American contexts, they emphasized Americanness. However, as KAWA grew, these women

became more comfortable expressing both aspects of their identity simultaneously. This shift allowed them to confidently blend Korean and American influences without feeling the need to compartmentalize or hide parts of themselves depending on the environment.

This adaptability reflects how a group's approach to identity can evolve due to structural changes in their social network. Brekhus's theory highlights that identity is shaped by factors such as social networks, geography, age, and status. KAWA's creation was a structural change that redefined the military brides' identity, allowing them to challenge traditional expectations in both American and Korean communities and adopt a more integrated identity.

The collective agency they cultivated in KAWA also allowed them to confront and redefine the traditional Korean and American perspectives on their identity. Korean immigrant communities often perceived them as "half-Korean" due to their integration into American society. Yet, within KAWA, these women gained confidence in their identity as Korean American military brides, rejecting the idea that their cross-cultural marriages or immigration made them less authentically Korean. By developing a strong community through KAWA, they redefined themselves in a way that embraced both their Korean heritage and their American experiences, building an inclusive identity that resisted narrow definitions from either culture.

In addition to redefining their Korean identity, the military brides used KAWA to push back against American expectations that they would fully assimilate. Rather than conforming completely to American cultural norms, they maintained a strong sense of Koreanness, seeing it as integral to their identity. Many KAWA members expressed that they had no intention of leaving the United States, which they considered their home, but they also valued their Korean roots deeply. Unlike the highly mobile transnational members who adopted a more flexible identity, the military brides found strength in embracing both their Korean and American sides as interconnected rather than separate.

Through KAWA, the military brides transformed their "in-between" status into a source of empowerment, challenging stereotypes and reshaping both American and Korean cultural identities. This process is aligned with bell hooks's idea of challenging "Otherness" to achieve inclusivity [10]. In other words, the military brides questioned why they should erase parts of themselves to fit either culture fully. Their collective agency in KAWA enabled them to build a community that fostered inclusivity and valued their unique experiences as Korean American military wives. This identity work allowed them to advocate for a broader understanding of both cultures, moving away from narrow definitions and encouraging a more inclusive perspective.

In summary, KAWA became a powerful force for the military brides to define their collective identity on their own terms. The organization provided a space for them to celebrate both their Korean heritage and their American experiences, helping them cultivate an identity that was not limited to either culture but blended elements of both. Through their active involvement in KAWA, these women embraced an identity that transcended cultural boundaries, asserting their right to define themselves as Korean American military brides. This empowered them to challenge stereotypes and advocate for a more nuanced understanding of their experiences, both within the Korean immigrant community and in broader American society.

LIMITATION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Even if the current research endeavored to scrutinize the role of structural transformation in building collective agency, it also has limitations and potential directions for future research. Some limitations were inherent to the research process, while others became apparent as the study unfolded. I will begin with the latter, as the adjustments made to the initial research design were necessary and ultimately enhanced the quality of this work and its potential for future contributions.

During the course of my study, I realized that certain important aspects of the research were overlooked. For instance, I did not fully address the concept of the “duality of social structure” (See Giddens, 1984) which suggests that human agents operate within social structures but also possess the ability to change or reshape them through their actions. Although this concept was intended to be a key theoretical foundation, my focus primarily remained on examining the influence of structure on the agents, rather than exploring how these agents—specifically, the group of military brides—might influence or alter the VKBC church structure through their collective agency. Additionally, I did not delve deeply into how their collective agency evolved through shared experiences and the exchange of meanings.

A further limitation stemmed from my decision to focus this study on a single case: the collective agency of military brides within a Korean ethnic church in the U.S. Expanding this research to include multi-case studies—both inter-organizationally and intra-organizationally—could yield valuable insights into the agency work of other non-transnational groups, such as other immigrant groups within VKBC or similar ethnic church communities across the United States. Broadening the study in this way could provide a more comprehensive understanding by including non-transnational members of VKBC, as well as members of other ethnic churches, and comparing their agency with that of the military brides. Such comparisons would facilitate a more generalizable perspective on how non-transnational immigrant groups engage in agency work and contribute to structural transformation within ethnic churches in the U.S.

Moreover, while this study aimed to compare the military brides with highly transnational members in terms of social, economic, cultural, and religious contexts, it would be equally valuable to examine the patterns of collective agency formation between non-transnational immigrants and highly transnational migrants. This comparative approach could offer insights that would enhance the generalization of the study’s findings.

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