

Article

Ethnic Identity and Transnational Engagement among Young Zainichi Koreans

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Introduction

The rapid progress of digital technologies and the proliferation of smartphones have made trans-border communication and mobility a normalized aspect of daily life, profoundly affecting how human relationships and identities are constituted in contemporary society (Castells 2009; Wellman 2001). In particular, the global expansion of social media has diminished the salience of physical national boundaries, allowing migrants and overseas Koreans to sustain close connections with both their homeland and third countries, thereby fostering a new migration paradigm termed transnationalism (Levitt and Schiller 2004; Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999). Transnationalism is not limited to cross-border physical mobility but also encapsulates continuous political, economic, and sociocultural interactions that extend across multiple nations (Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992, 1994; Vertovec 1999). This perspective offers a multi-faceted and bidirectional framework, conceptualizing migrants as embedded within interconnected relationships involving the host society, homeland, and the migrants themselves, and serves as a theoretical basis for analyzing the fluid and complex nature of identity within diaspora studies (Faist 2000a; Y. T. Kim 2022; Y. Lee 2017).

This framework has further enabled scholars to examine the ways in which overseas Koreans continually negotiate their identities along intersecting trajectories of ethnicization and assimilation—where ethnicization denotes the preservation and symbolic strengthening of ethnic identity, while assimilation refers to the gradual integration into the host society (Tsuda 2016). These processes are not inherently oppositional; rather, they can unfold simultaneously, resulting in adaptive, dual, or hybrid forms of identity that embody both cultural continuity and transformation (Barros and Albert 2020; Goitom 2016).

Previous research on Zainichi Koreans has largely concentrated on classifying their ethnic identity into defined categories or comparing generational variations, with an emphasis on the diaspora paradigm (Fukuoka 1993; Harajiri 1998; Hwang 2016; H. Kim 2008; J. G. Kim 2004). This line of inquiry has often depicted Zainichi Koreans as a static diasporic group, thus overlooking the dynamic and pragmatic identity formations evident among younger generations raised in Japan. There remains a lack of empirical investigation into the specific mechanisms through which identities are constructed and altered as a result of transnational practices (S. Jung 2025, 12).

Additionally, recent scholarship indicates that second- and third-generation migrants increasingly recognize that full social integration in the host society remains constrained by persistent perceptions of foreignness, even after extended periods of residence (Aparicio and Tornos 2017; Tsuda 2017). This recognition frequently results in either strategic assimilation or conscious re-ethnicization, in which ethnic heritage is not simply preserved but actively mobilized as a salient identity resource in response to ongoing exclusion (Levitt and Waters 2002; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Waters 1990).

Building on these insights, this study examines third- to fifth-generation Zainichi Koreans in their 20s and 30s, focusing on the extent and types of their transnational practices and their influence on ethnic identity. Particular emphasis is placed on the concrete modes of identity formation among young Zainichi Koreans, in relation to shifting societal contexts in Japan—such as the proliferation of the Korean Wave (Hallyu), the expansion of SNS-based information sharing, and the entrenchment of multicultural discourses—alongside the elevated global profile and cultural influence of South Korea (Hwang 2016; Yim, Kim, and Heo 2023; G. Jung 2021).

These developments exemplify a significant international trend away from assimilationist models toward multicultural approaches to integration in numerous host societies since the 1970s (Brubaker 2001; Castles and Miller 2009; Kymlicka 1995). Rather than imposing cultural homogenization, contemporary societies are increasingly supporting the coexistence of diverse cultural identities, which encourages transnational engagement and the retention of ancestral cultures (Modood 2007).

Zainichi Koreans, descendants of the so-called “oldcomers” who migrated to Japan following the 1910 annexation of Korea by Japan, now constitute populations reaching a fifth generation. Nonetheless, existing scholarship on their identity has predominantly focused on either the maintenance of ethnic traditions or the extent of their assimilation into Japanese society. This research, however, foregrounds the possibility that MZ-generation Zainichi Koreans, shaped by digital and transnational media contexts, may be cultivating more complex identities and homeland affiliations distinct from earlier cohorts. Engaging in activities such as consuming Hallyu-related media through social networking platforms, traveling to Korea, acquiring Korean language proficiency, and joining homeland-oriented networks, they construct intricate links between their country of residence and their country of origin. These activities represent

not only assertions of their identities but also routine forms of transnationalism deeply integrated into everyday experiences (J. Y. Kim 2009; I. Yoon 2013).

This dynamic context has prompted recent generations to engage in what scholars term as “symbolic ethnicity” or “transnational belonging,” wherein individuals experience emotional, cultural, and social connections to both their homeland and the host society, even in the absence of physical migration or legal citizenship (Faist 2000b; Madianou 2019).

Accordingly, this study seeks to empirically analyze the correlation between the extent of transnational activities (across political, economic, and sociocultural spheres) and the ethnic identity of young Zainichi Koreans. The research investigates how these individuals construct or negotiate identity within the interplay of their host society and homeland relationships. In pursuing this objective, the study aims to transcend traditional diaspora frameworks and sheds light on the intricate identity configurations found in the lived experiences of contemporary young Zainichi Koreans. Ultimately, it advances perspectives for diaspora policy and identity scholarship by offering a nuanced account of the complex subjectivities and transnational engagements among the younger generation of Zainichi Koreans.

Utilizing a theoretically robust and empirically informed methodology, this research adds to ongoing discussions about migrant integration and the processes of identity formation across generational lines and in different national contexts.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This study provides a critical review of theoretical and empirical literature on ethnic identity and transnationalism, with a specific focus on the sociocultural environments of third- to fifth-generation Zainichi Koreans. Contrasting with earlier studies that primarily delineate Zainichi identity typologies or attribute identity change to distinct causal mechanisms, this research foregrounds the shifting dynamics of identity formation as influenced by transnational practices and engagement with the Korean Wave (Hallyu).

Ethnic Identity: A Dynamic, Generationally Situated Concept

Ethnic identity does not represent a static category but is instead a complex,

evolving construct influenced by individual and group experiences. Early psychological and sociological models (e.g., Erikson 1968; Tajfel and Turner 1986) conceptualized identity formation as a sequential process involving the adoption of roles and group affiliations. In contrast, contemporary research highlights identity as a process of ongoing negotiation that is deeply embedded in social, cultural, and generational frameworks (Phinney 1989; Vignoles, Schwartz, and Luyckx 2011).

Ethnicity, as understood here, denotes common ancestry, language, historical background, and culture. Ethnic identity entails an individual's internalized sense of association with such a group, integrating emotional bonds and social behaviors. Among ethnic minorities, particularly in migration contexts, ethnic identity is profoundly shaped by intergroup interactions and the degree of societal acceptance or marginalization (Phinney 1990; Umana-Taylor and Guimond 2010).

For children of immigrants, familial transmission and parental socialization play crucial roles in shaping identity development (Bernal et al. 1990; Knight et al. 1993). Yet, lived experiences of marginalization and social discrimination can complicate these processes, resulting in the emergence of hybrid or fragmented identities (Phinney and Kohatsu 1997). For third- to fifth-generation Zainichi Koreans—most of whom are born and raised in Japan, use Japanese as their primary language, and receive education through Japanese institutions—the process of ethnic identity formation displays distinct patterns. Unlike earlier generations that prioritized ethnic preservation and nationalism, the younger cohorts are more inclined to construct their identity through adaptable and strategic affiliations. Their sense of belonging often develops within two overlapping frameworks: cultural integration in Japanese society alongside the maintenance of symbolic ties to Korea. Such evolving dynamics highlight the necessity for analytical frameworks that move beyond essentialist understandings of ethnicity (S. Jung 2025).

Drawing on Ong's (1999) concept of flexible citizenship, scholars have increasingly advocated viewing ethnicity not simply as a fixed inheritance but as a resource that can be mobilized variably across different contexts. This approach highlights the strategic ways in which individuals position themselves and negotiate belonging, particularly among diasporic and post-diasporic groups.

At this point, it is useful to situate these dynamics within a broader shift from classical diaspora to what recent scholarship conceptualizes as a post-

diasporic condition. Classical diaspora studies have tended to define diaspora as a collective condition shaped by historical displacement, sustained orientation toward an ancestral homeland, and relatively stable forms of ethnic identity reproduced through shared memory, kinship, and institutional continuity (Cohen 2008). However, such assumptions become increasingly inadequate for understanding later-generation populations whose everyday lives are no longer organized around homeland-centered political projects or narratives of return.

In this study, the term “post-diasporic” does not denote a historical stage “after” diaspora, nor does it imply the erosion of diasporic ties. Rather, it refers to a generational and experiential condition in which diasporic belonging is no longer inherited as an obligatory identity but is strategically mobilized and contextually negotiated. This understanding builds on Hall’s (1990) influential argument that cultural identity should be understood not as a fixed essence but as a process of positioning—one that is continuously formed and reformed in relation to shifting social contexts. From this perspective, ethnic affiliation functions less as a taken-for-granted collective status than as a symbolic and relational resource that can be activated, downplayed, or reinterpreted depending on situational demands.

Within this framework, members of the newer generations have at times engaged in re-ethnicization—that is, selectively reclaiming or reinforcing their ethnic identity—as a response to experiences of racial discrimination, exclusion, or enduring perceptions of foreignness in the host society (Portes and Zhou 1993; Rumbaut 2008). For Zainichi Koreans confronted with persistent boundary-making despite long-standing residence in Japan, ethnic identity thus operates not only as a cultural touchstone but also as a source of psychological resilience and social positioning. Furthermore, among newer generations, identity tends to be negotiated situationally: individuals may foreground national belonging in professional or public contexts while reaffirming ethnic identity in familial or community settings (Modood 2007; Waters 1990). This pattern underscores that identity is constructed flexibly and relationally, shifting in response to social circumstances rather than remaining static or singular.

Recent scholarship on Zainichi Koreans further develops this relational and processual understanding by explicitly challenging binary and assimilation-centered frameworks (González-Lario 2017; Seong 2019; Park 2022; Yasumoto 2024). Rather than interpreting identity formation as a linear movement toward assimilation or as the preservation of a fixed diasporic consciousness,

these studies conceptualize ethnic identity as generationally differentiated and institutionally mediated. Empirical findings indicate that later-generation identity trajectories are shaped by educational experiences, family-transmitted social capital, community networks, and encounters with discrimination. In line with the post-diasporic perspective outlined above, younger Zainichi Koreans are shown to negotiate belonging strategically across institutional and social contexts, mobilizing ethnic affiliation variably rather than inheriting it as an obligatory collective status.

Cultural analyses further extend this discussion by highlighting multilayered and transnational forms of identification that transcend the conventional Korean–Japanese binary. These approaches illuminate how global cultural flows, media consumption, and cross-border symbolic resources reshape the meaning of “Koreanness” among later generations. However, despite these important advances, limited attention has been paid to how digitally mediated cultural participation—particularly engagement with Hallyu—intersects with ethnic identity formation and everyday transnational practices among younger cohorts.

By situating digitally mediated cultural engagement within the broader framework of post-diasporic identity negotiation, the present study seeks to bridge this gap. It examines how participation in Hallyu functions not merely as cultural consumption but as a symbolic and relational practice through which ethnic affiliation is reinterpreted, strategically mobilized, or selectively intensified in contemporary Japan.

Transnationalism: Beyond Diaspora and Nation-State Frameworks

The emergence of transnationalism as a conceptual lens addresses the shortcomings of classical assimilation theory (Alba and Nee 2003; Gordon 1964) and provides a more sophisticated account of cross-border social relations. Whereas previous research often assumed a straightforward trajectory toward full assimilation into the host society, transnationalism stresses the continuing ways that migrants sustain active linkages with their countries of origin (Levitt and Schiller 2004; Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992).

Transnationalism encompasses more than cross-border activities; it denotes sustained, multilayered social relations that traverse nation-states. Portes (2001) highlights the role of individual agency in upholding transnational practices—

be they economic, political, cultural, or social. Scholars have distinguished between “transnationalism from above” (initiated by states or institutions) and “transnationalism from below” (grassroots or individual-level activities) (Smith and Guarnizo 1998).

Within the context of this study, our focus lies in exploring social and cultural transnationalism. Recent scholarship (Jang 2021; Min 2017) has underscored the importance of distinguishing these domains, demonstrating that not all cultural practices (for example, traditional ceremonies) signify transnational perspectives, nor do all social connections indicate cross-border involvement. Social transnationalism typically entails ongoing emotional and communicative connections with family and friends residing abroad, while cultural transnationalism often involves media engagement, language practices, or participation in symbolic rituals.

Itzigsohn et al. (1999) elaborate on transnationalism by differentiating between narrow and broad forms, according to the frequency, level of institutionalization, and strength of cross-border connections. These typological distinctions clarify the difference between regular, structured involvement and occasional or symbolic expressions of transnational affiliation.

A notable trend among newer generations is the emergence of digitally mediated transnational identities. The idea of a “digital diaspora” (Brinkerhoff 2009; Y. N. Kim 2021; Madianou and Miller 2012) encapsulates how digital platforms such as social media, video-sharing sites, and messaging applications facilitate enduring cultural and emotional connections across borders. For Zainichi youth, digital technology acts as a conduit to homeland culture, enabling daily expressions of belonging without necessitating physical travel (González-Lario 2017).

Digital and Everyday Transnationalism: The Case of Hallyu and Zainichi Youth

Recent research has broadened the concept of transnationalism to incorporate digital transnationalism—the maintenance of cross-border ties through digital media without the need for physical movement (Horst 2006). This is particularly evident among younger migrants, for whom SNS platforms support real-time interactions with homeland culture, language, and sociopolitical contexts (Park and Gerrits 2021).

With Zainichi youth, these patterns appear through engagement in K-pop, Korean drama viewing, YouTube content consumption, and the adoption of Korean language learning applications. These activities foster a sense of symbolic belonging and contribute to what Raja and Yang (2025) alongside Mansouri, Beaman, and Hussain (2025) identify as everyday transnationalism. Such engagements tend to be habitual and emotionally rooted, rather than formally structured or strategically organized, and are situated within the ongoing processes of identity construction.

Thus, Zainichi Koreans in their 20s and 30s are engaging in contemporary forms of cultural and social transnationalism that challenge traditional diasporic frameworks. Their identity practices exhibit hybridity and dynamism and are significantly shaped by digital technologies. This development indicates the need to update analytical frameworks to account for informal, affective, and symbolic dimensions of belonging and connection.

Data and Research Methods

Data

Data for this study were collected through a survey targeting young adult third- to fifth-generation Zainichi Koreans in their 20s and 30s. Respondents' generational status was determined based on self-identification. The survey instrument included generational categories ranging from third to fifth generation (including 3.5 and 4.5 classifications). Although parental generational background was also collected for analytical purposes, the study sample consists exclusively of self-identified third- to fifth-generation Zainichi Koreans. This age group was chosen on the basis of their greater familiarity with online media compared to older generations and their anticipated centrality within the emerging Zainichi community. The survey, which was conducted online from November 8 to November 15, 2024, was administered by Entrust Survey, an international company specializing in survey-based research.

Ethical Considerations

This study followed core guidelines for research involving human participants.

Enrollment was fully voluntary, and all subjects received a Participant Information Sheet and an Informed Consent Form detailing the ethical considerations, including confidentiality, privacy, and informed consent. Institutional Review Board approval was granted by Korea University (IRB No. KUIRB-2024-0469-01).

Research Method

Utilizing quantitative research methodology, this investigation used a self-administered structured questionnaire for data collection. Statistical analyses were conducted with SPSS Statistics 28.0. Descriptive statistics were generated to outline the basic characteristics of the sample, and the reliability of key scales was determined by calculating Cronbach's α coefficients. To further explore variable relationships, correlation analysis was carried out, and multiple regression analysis was employed to assess the statistical significance of hypothesized model paths. Because the data are cross-sectional, the regression coefficients should be interpreted as statistically estimated associations based on theoretically informed directionality, rather than definitive causal effects.

To supplement the quantitative findings and to provide illustrative insight into the everyday practices of younger Zainichi Koreans, three semi-structured interviews were conducted between January and February 2025. Participants were selected to reflect variation in nationality status and generational background. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was conducted in Korean or Japanese according to participants' preference. All participants provided informed consent, and pseudonyms (A, B, and C) are used to ensure confidentiality. Interview transcripts were reviewed and thematically examined to identify recurring patterns related to digital engagement, identity negotiation, and perceptions of integration. While the qualitative sample is limited and not intended to be representative, the interviews serve an illustrative purpose by contextualizing and interpreting the statistical findings.

Measurement Instruments

The questionnaire was organized into four main sections. First, respondents' sociodemographic data—including gender, age, educational level, employment, marital status, and living arrangement—were gathered. Second, ethnic

Table 1. Key Variables and Corresponding Measurement Indicators

Variable		Measurement Indicators
Sociodemographic Characteristics		Gender, age, region, country of birth, duration of residence in Japan, nationality and residency status, parents' ethnic background (nationality and generation), and individual's ethnic background
Transnational Engagement	Economic	Remittances to the home country, acquisition of goods from the home country, investment, housing, and attention to economic conditions in the home country
	Sociocultural	Communication with Korean family and friends, participation in Korean cultural activities, and involvement in related social media
	Political	Involvement in homeland elections, engagement with political conditions in the home country, and participation in Korean civic organizations
Social Integration in Host Society	Socioeconomic	Employment in the host society, access to economic resources, and experiences of discrimination
	Sociocultural	Competence in the host society's language and culture, adjustment to local customs, and development of a sense of belonging
	Political	Engagement in the host society's political issues and participation within its political system
Ethnic Identity		Recognition as an ethnic Korean, active engagement with the language, historical background, and political issues of the Korean community

identity was assessed using items addressing ethnic pride, sense of community belonging, and commitment to ethnic cultural practices. Third, participants' transnational engagement was evaluated through measures such as return visits to the country of origin, involvement in related events, proficiency and usage of the heritage language, and attention to sociopolitical issues in the ancestral homeland. Fourth, the social networks section measured the extent and quality of connections with family, relatives, and friends, as well as perceived social support. Responses to all scale items were recorded on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Research Model and Hypotheses

This study aims to empirically analyze the impact of Zainichi Koreans' ethnic identity on their degree of transnational engagement amid contemporary social transformations. While the term "Zainichi" is often associated with a uniform and monolithic group identity, prior research demonstrates that Zainichi identities exhibit far greater complexity compared to many other diasporic populations, with diversity increasing across generations. La (2013) contends that the hybridity and multilayered qualities of Zainichi identity

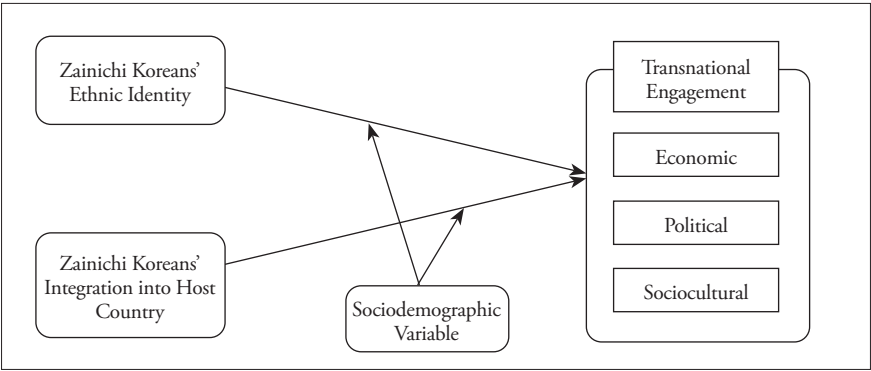


Figure 1. Research Model

are profoundly influenced by both generational changes and wider forces such as transnationalism. In addition, the proportion of Zainichi individuals with multifaceted sociodemographic backgrounds has increased over time. Nonetheless, earlier studies on Zainichi Koreans have primarily centered on categorizing and classifying their identities from a diaspora framework, without sufficiently investigating how these identities are enacted through transnational practices. Consequently, this research seeks to explore forms of transnational engagement as manifestations of ethnic identity.

The research model includes two independent variables (ethnic identity and integration level into the host society), one moderating variable (sociodemographic factors), and one dependent variable (degree of transnational engagement). The dependent variable is divided into three subcategories: economic, political, and sociocultural engagement. This model serves to examine how Zainichi Koreans' ethnic identity as members of the ethnic Korean community in Japan and their integration into Japanese society relate to their transnational engagement. Furthermore, it considers whether sociodemographic factors moderate the relationship between these variables.

While previous scholarship suggests that ethnic identity, host-society integration, and transnational engagement may influence one another in complex and potentially reciprocal ways, the present study analytically specifies ethnic identity and host-country integration as independent variables and transnational engagement as the dependent variable. This directional specification is grounded in the theoretical assumption that identity orientation and structural incorporation shape individuals' motivations, resources, and

opportunities for cross-border engagement. Accordingly, the hypotheses below are formulated to test how variations in identity and integration predict differences in transnational practices among young Zainichi Koreans.

As for the determinants of migrants' transnational engagement, Kemppainen et al. (2020) argue that both the host country environment and the sociopolitical context of the country of origin play significant roles. Y. Lee (2017) highlights that transnational activities are situated within transnational networks and identifies family composition as a key sociodemographic determinant. Expanding upon these insights and recognizing that Zainichi ethnic identity evolves in complexity depending on nationality, generational status, and other background factors, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: The forms of interaction between ethnic identity and level of host-country integration, as well as the extent of transnational engagement, will vary according to the sociodemographic profiles of Zainichi Koreans.

Previous research on the relationship between transnational engagement and ethnic identity suggests a close linkage between the two, showing that activities such as the granting of voting rights in homeland politics or pursuing education in the country of origin can reinforce ethnic identity formation (Ha 2010; Y. T. Kim, 2024; D. Yoon 2014). Building on this line of research, this study expects that a stronger sense of ethnic identity as members of the Korean ethnic community will be associated with higher levels of transnational engagement across political, economic, and sociocultural domains. Based on this expectation, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: The strength of Zainichi Koreans' ethnic identity as members of the Korean ethnic community will be positively associated with their level of transnational engagement.

With respect to the relationship between host-country integration and transnational engagement, prior research suggests a close and often inverse association between the two. While some scholars have noted that transnational activities may also influence patterns of integration in the host society (Y. Lee 2017), this study focuses on the extent to which levels of structural and sociopolitical integration shape migrants' engagement in cross-border activities.

In contexts where migrants experience limited incorporation or adjustment difficulties, transnational practices may serve as alternative resources for social belonging and economic security (Jones-Correa 1998; Faist 2000a; Landolt 2001). Conversely, higher levels of integration into the host society may reduce the necessity or motivation for intensive homeland-oriented engagement. Building on this perspective, the study advances the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Higher levels of integration into Japanese society will be associated with lower levels of transnational engagement among Zainichi Koreans.

Results

Sociodemographic Characteristics

Of the respondents, 103 were male (61%) and 67 were female (39%), showing a predominance of male respondents. The age distribution was: 22 respondents (13%) were 20–24, 48 (28%) were 25–29, 54 (32%) were 30–34, and 46 (27%) were 35–39.

Regarding place of residence, 61 respondents (36%) lived in Tokyo Metropolis, 17 (10%) in Yokohama City, 32 (19%) in Osaka Prefecture, 15 (9%) in Nagoya Prefecture, 8 (5%) in Sapporo City, 7 (4%) in Kobe City, 6 (4%) in Kyoto Prefecture, 8 (5%) in Fukuoka Prefecture, and 16 (9%) in other Prefectures. In relation to country of birth, 82 individuals (48%) were born in Japan and 88 (52%) were born in Korea. The relatively high representation of Korea-born respondents among third- to fifth-generation Zainichi Koreans is uncommon. This finding is likely explained by the online format of the survey, which may have preferentially engaged participants with a pronounced interest in maintaining ties to their country of origin. As a result, these data should be interpreted prudently: the sample may not reflect the broader third- to fifth-generation Zainichi Korean population, but rather a subset with distinct interests. To minimize possible bias due to this sampling feature, the analysis included country of birth and nationality as control variables.

In terms of duration of residence in Japan, 2 respondents (1%) had lived in the country for less than one year, 7 (4%) for one to under two years, 19 (11%)

Table 2. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Respondents

Category		Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	103	60.6
	Female	67	39.4
Age	20–24	22	12.9
	25–29	48	28.2
	30–34	54	31.8
	35–39	46	27.1
Place of Residence	Tokyo	61	35.9
	Yokohama	17	10.0
	Osaka	32	18.8
	Nagoya	15	8.8
	Sapporo	8	4.7
	Kobe	7	4.1
	Kyoto	6	3.5
	Fukuoka	8	4.7
	Other	16	9.4
Country of Birth	Japan	82	48.2
	Korea	88	51.8
Residency Status	Korean Nationality	103	60.6
	Special Permanent Resident	63	37.1
	Permanent Resident	24	14.1
	Long-Term Resident	11	6.5
	Other	5	2.9
	Japanese Nationality	67	39.4
Father's Nationality	Korean	137	80.6
	Japanese	33	19.4
Mother's Nationality	Korean	109	64.1
	Japanese	61	35.9
Generation of Respondent	3 rd	89	52.4
	3.5 th	38	22.4
	4 th	31	18.2
	4.5 th	4	2.4
	5 th	8	4.7

Note: Generational status was determined based on respondents' self-identification and classified according to their parents' generational backgrounds: 1.5th (one parent is first generation and the other was born on the Korean Peninsula); 2nd (both parents are first generation); 2.5th (both parents are second or third generation); 3.5th (one parent is second generation and the other is third generation); and 4.5th (one parent is third generation and the other is fourth generation).

for two to under five years, 35 (21%) for five to under ten years, 33 (19%) for ten to under fifteen years, 18 (11%) for fifteen to under twenty years, 13 (8%) for twenty to under twenty-five years, 12 (7%) for twenty-five to under thirty years, 14 (8%) for thirty to under thirty-five years, and 16 (9%) for thirty-five to under forty years.

Considering residency status, the majority of the sample were Korean nationals (103 respondents, 61%). Among them, 63 (37%) possessed Special Permanent Resident status, 24 (14%) held permanent residency, 11 (6%) held long-term resident status, and 5 (3%) were classified under other residency types. Japanese nationals made up 67 respondents (39%).

The variables related to family background comprised parental nationality and generational status. For fathers, 137 respondents (81%) indicated Korean nationality, while 33 (19%) noted Japanese nationality; for mothers, 109 respondents (64%) reported Korean nationality and 61 (36%) Japanese nationality. Regarding paternal generation, 59 respondents (35%) categorized their father as first generation, 18 (11%) as 1.5 generation, 51 (30%) as second generation, 3 (2%) as 2.5 generation, and 17 (10%) as third generation. Concerning maternal generation, 28 respondents (16%) identified first generation, 70 (41%) 1.5 generation, 22 (13%) second generation, 5 (3%) 2.5 generation, and 24 (14%) third generation. The rate of missing responses for this question was 13% for fathers (22 cases) and 10% for mothers (17 cases).

Regarding the respondents' own generation, the majority belonged to the third generation (89 respondents, 52%), followed by 3.5th (38 respondents, 22%), fourth generation (31 respondents, 18%), 4.5th generation (4 respondents, 2%), and fifth generation (8 respondents, 5%).

Levels of Transnational Engagement, Social Integration in the Host Country, and Ethnic Identity

Independent-samples t-tests demonstrated significant gender-based differences for multiple variables. Women showed higher levels of overall transnational engagement ($p < .01$), as well as both economic ($p < .01$) and political ($p < .01$) transnational activities, relative to men. Additionally, women had greater political integration into the host society ($p < .05$). These findings indicate that in this sample, women are more engaged in economic and political activities that cross borders and exhibit stronger political participation within the host country.

Table 3. Levels of Transnationalism, Social Integration, and Ethnic Identity by Demographic Factors

		Gender		Nationality		Birthplace	
		Men	Women	Japan	Korea	Japan	Korea
Transnational Engagement	Overall	2.50	2.78**	2.92	2.33**	2.67	2.58
	Economic	2.68	2.99**	3.12	2.50**	2.86	2.76
	Political	2.31	2.69**	2.81	2.14**	2.56	2.39
	Sociocultural	2.51	2.67	2.82	2.34**	2.58	2.57
Social Integration within the Host Society	Socioeconomic	2.29	2.44	2.53	2.18**	2.30	2.38
	Political	2.82	3.18*	3.10	2.83	2.75	3.10*
	Sociocultural	2.18	2.32	2.21	2.25	2.10	2.32
Ethnic Identity		2.49	2.75	2.91	2.30**	2.64	2.57

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

No significant gender differences were noted in sociocultural transnational engagement, socioeconomic or sociocultural integration, or ethnic identity, suggesting these dimensions may be less subject to gender-related effects in this population.

Nationality-based comparisons revealed even greater disparities. Respondents with Japanese nationality demonstrated significantly higher levels of overall ($p < .001$), economic ($p < .001$), political ($p < .001$), and sociocultural ($p < .001$) transnational engagement compared to those with Korean nationality. Additionally, they achieved higher scores in socioeconomic integration ($p < .01$) and ethnic identity ($p < .001$). These findings suggest that holding Japanese nationality may provide structural and institutional advantages that support increased involvement in economic, political, and sociocultural activities, as well as a more pronounced sense of ethnic identity. However, there were no significant differences in political or sociocultural integration, indicating that these facets of integration might be more strongly affected by individual or community-level processes than by legal nationality.

From a sociological standpoint, these findings highlight gender and nationality as critical axes of stratification influencing transnational engagement and integration among Zainichi Koreans. The relatively higher participation of women in certain transnational and political arenas may be attributable to

both prevailing gendered expectations and their active roles within family- and community-focused transnational networks. In contrast, the benefits conferred by Japanese nationality underscore the persistent importance of legal status in shaping access to resources and opportunities, which in turn conditions pathways of transnational engagement and integration for diasporic populations.

Factors Influencing Transnational Engagement

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed to identify factors affecting overall transnational engagement and its economic, political, and sociocultural dimensions. All models reached statistical significance, with R^2 values ranging from .582 (sociocultural) to .710 (political), demonstrating robust explanatory power.

For overall transnational engagement, the significant predictors were age group ($\beta = -.132$, $p < .05$), duration of residence in Japan ($\beta = .267$, $p < .001$), socioeconomic integration ($\beta = .171$, $p < .01$), political integration ($\beta = .276$, $p < .001$), and ethnic identity ($\beta = .424$, $p < .001$). Ethnic identity exhibited the most substantial effect, followed by political and socioeconomic integration, indicating that a salient Korean ethnic identity and active host society participation significantly encourage ongoing cross-border engagement.

Within the economic sphere, significant predictors included age group ($\beta = -.163$, $p < .05$), duration of residence ($\beta = .304$, $p < .001$), political integration ($\beta = .251$, $p < .001$), and ethnic identity ($\beta = .371$, $p < .001$). Among these, ethnic identity had the strongest impact, demonstrating that robust identification with Korean ethnicity corresponds with increased remittances, homeland-related purchases, and other economically transnational activities.

For political transnational engagement, significant predictors included age group ($\beta = -.126$, $p < .05$), duration of residence ($\beta = .187$, $p < .01$), socioeconomic integration ($\beta = .159$, $p < .01$), political integration ($\beta = .412$, $p < .001$), and ethnic identity ($\beta = .372$, $p < .001$). Political integration was identified as the most influential variable, emphasizing how engagement in host-country political activities facilitates the preservation of political connections with the homeland.

Within the sociocultural domain, duration of residence ($\beta = .267$, $p < .001$), socioeconomic integration ($\beta = .234$, $p < .01$), and ethnic identity ($\beta = .460$, $p < .001$) were all found to be significant, with ethnic identity

demonstrating the greatest explanatory power across models. This underscores the pivotal function of a strong cultural identity in maintaining language practices, involvement in cultural traditions, and intergenerational transmission of heritage values.

Through a sociological lens, the findings emphasize that both structural forms of integration and subjective identity dimensions are critical in shaping the transnational practices of Zainichi Koreans. Ethnic identity consistently proves to be a key predictor in all analyzed domains, indicating that a strong connection to the Korean ethnic community serves not only as a motivational resource but also as a symbolic anchor for active participation in economic, political, and cultural exchanges with the country of origin.

Furthermore, political and socioeconomic integration within the host society act as enabling conditions rather than functioning as alternatives to transnational engagement. Individuals who achieve higher levels of economic security and political participation exhibit a greater capacity to sustain transnational networks, which reflects a “resource mobilization” approach, in contrast to a simple dichotomy between assimilation and transnationalism.

Additionally, the observed negative association between age and transnational engagement across most models points to generational change,

Table 4. Standardized Regression Coefficients (Beta) for Factors Affecting the Level of Transnational Engagement

Independent Variables	Transnational Engagement			
	Overall	Economic Factors	Political Factors	Sociocultural Factors
Gender (Male = 1, Female = 0)	-0.031	-0.044	-0.048	0.010
Nationality (Korean = 1, Japanese = 0)	-0.027	-0.032	-0.055	0.018
Age Group	-0.132*	-0.163*	-0.126*	-0.079
Duration of Residence in Japan	0.267**	0.304**	0.187**	0.267**
Socioeconomic Integration	0.171**	0.096	0.159**	0.234**
Political Integration	0.276**	0.251**	0.412**	0.079
Sociocultural Integration	-0.004	0.050	-0.089	0.041
Ethnic Identity	0.424**	0.371**	0.372**	0.460**
F	48.640	31.820	49.180	28.060
R ²	0.707	0.613	0.710	0.582
AdjR ²	0.693	0.593	0.695	0.562

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

with younger individuals displaying increased participation in transnational activities. This pattern may be linked to transformations in political opportunities, shifts in identity politics, and the expanding role of digital communication in reducing barriers to maintaining ties with the homeland.

Moreover, the robust positive relationship between duration of residence and transnational engagement suggests that prolonged residence in Japan does not necessarily erode connections to the homeland; rather, it may offer the stability and resources needed to maintain them. This evidence challenges linear assimilation theories and lends support to more nuanced, bidirectional frameworks of migrant adaptation and transnational activity.

Moderating Effect of Nationality on the Relationship Between Host-Country Integration and Transnational Engagement

Analyses of group differences and regression models demonstrated that Zainichi Koreans with Japanese nationality participated in transnational activities at a higher frequency than those holding Korean nationality. Additionally, sociocultural integration within Japanese society was not found to be a significant predictor of transnational engagement in any model examined. To further explore these dynamics, a moderation analysis was performed to determine whether certain control variables shape the relationship between host-country integration and transnational engagement. The analysis identified a significant moderating effect of nationality.

Table 5. Results of the Moderating Effect of Nationality on the Relationship Between Sociocultural Integration and Transnational Engagement

Variable	B	SE	t	p
Sociocultural Integration	.004	.079	.052	.958
Nationality	-.305	.080	-3.81	0.000
Sociocultural Integration* Nationality	.219	.104	2.115	.036*
Ethnic Identity	.484	.044	11.07	.000
F(p)	58.38(.000)			
R2	0.586			
ΔR2	0.011			

*p<.05, **p<.01

Table 6. Test of the Conditional Effect of Nationality

Nationality	B	SE	t	p
Japanese	.004	.079	.052	.958
Korean	.223	.070	3.212**	.002**
*p<.05, **p<.01				

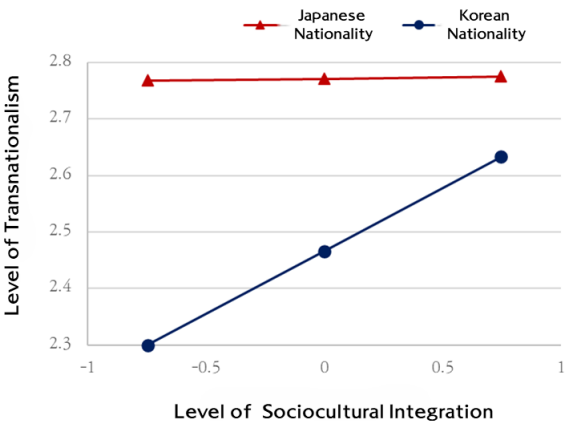


Figure 2. Moderating Effect of Nationality on the Relationship Between Sociocultural Integration and Transnational Engagement

Specifically, the interaction between sociocultural integration and nationality reached significance ($B = .219$, $p < .05$) exclusively for the sociocultural dimension of integration. As illustrated in Figure 2, simple slopes analysis revealed differing trends depending on nationality. For respondents with Japanese nationality, the slope was not statistically significant ($p = .958$), even though they generally exhibited higher levels of both sociocultural integration and transnational engagement relative to Korean nationals. Furthermore, the extent of their engagement in transnational activities remained largely stable regardless of changes in sociocultural integration. In contrast, for Zainichi Koreans with Korean nationality, the slope was significant ($p = .002$), suggesting that higher sociocultural integration corresponded to more frequent transnational engagement ($B = .223$, $p < .01$).

Qualitative Supplement: Digital Everyday Transnationalism and Strategic Identity Negotiation

To further interpret the statistical findings and to address dimensions that are difficult to capture through survey-based measures, three semi-structured interviews were conducted with young Zainichi Koreans from different generational and nationality backgrounds. Although limited in scope and not intended to be representative, these interviews provide illustrative insight into the mechanisms underlying the quantitative patterns identified above.

One of the unexpected findings of the quantitative analysis was that respondents holding Japanese nationality reported stronger expressions of Korean ethnic identity than those with Korean nationality. Interview data help contextualize this result.

Interviewee A (male, fourth generation, Japanese nationality) described identifying as “fully Japanese” during childhood, having attended Japanese schools and grown up in a predominantly Japanese social environment. However, during university, exposure to Zainichi networks, Korean student communities, and diasporic activism prompted a reconsideration of his background. Rather than experiencing nationality as a marker of assimilation, he described it as providing institutional stability that enabled a reflexive and voluntary re-engagement with Korean identity.

This account suggests that legal incorporation may reduce structural insecurity and thereby create conditions for selective and strategic ethnic reaffirmation. In this context, ethnic identity is not experienced as an inherited obligation but as a consciously embraced affiliation. Such narratives help explain why Japanese-national Zainichi Koreans may express strong ethnic identification without perceiving it as contradictory to their formal membership in Japanese society.

Regression results indicated that higher levels of host-society integration do not uniformly suppress transnational engagement. The interviews further illuminate this coexistence.

Interviewee B (female, fourth generation, Korean nationality) reported active participation in Japanese society while simultaneously maintaining intensive digital engagement with Korean media, popular culture, and consumer goods. Korean dramas, K-pop, social media content, and online communities constituted part of her daily routine. Despite anticipating long-term residence and

career development in Japan, she did not view this integration as incompatible with homeland-oriented engagement.

Interviewee C (female, 3.5 generation, Korean nationality) similarly anticipated a future in Japan while continuing frequent visits to Korea and sustained consumption of Korean cultural content. For both participants, digital platforms such as YouTube and Instagram enabled ongoing exposure to Korean social and political developments.

These accounts suggest that structural incorporation may coexist with, and at times facilitate, digitally mediated forms of everyday transnationalism. Integration can provide economic stability and mobility resources that support sustained cross-border engagement. In digitally mediated contexts, integration and transnationalism are therefore not necessarily structurally opposed but may operate on partially distinct social dimensions.

The interviews also highlight the situational and strategic character of identity among younger Zainichi Koreans. Identity was not expressed uniformly but articulated selectively depending on context and audience.

Interviewee A described identifying explicitly as a “fourth-generation Zainichi Korean” in activist or digital spaces, while presenting himself simply as “mixed” in broader social settings. He characterized himself as occupying a boundary position, navigating both Korean and Japanese contexts. Interviewee C similarly defined herself as “a person with Korean nationality who grew up in Japanese culture,” resisting singular categorization.

These narratives indicate that ethnic identity functions as a context-dependent and relational resource rather than a fixed essence. It is mobilized strategically across digital spaces, interpersonal interactions, and cross-border networks. Such flexibility helps explain how strong ethnic identification can coexist with high levels of integration and active transnational participation.

Across all interviews, digital media emerged as central to contemporary transnational engagement. Participation in online discussions, consumption of Korean popular culture, SNS-based self-identification, and digitally sustained networks were embedded in everyday routines rather than exceptional acts.

For this younger generation, transnationalism is increasingly enacted through digital infrastructures rather than solely through physical mobility. Continuous symbolic and affective connection to Korea is maintained even within structurally integrated lives in Japan. These qualitative accounts reinforce the broader quantitative finding that young Zainichi Koreans should not be

understood as a settled and static diaspora but as actors navigating multilayered identities within digitally mediated transnational social fields.

Conclusion

Summary of Major Findings

The study offers a thorough analysis of the factors shaping transnational engagement within the post-diaspora Zainichi Korean generation, highlighting the roles of demographic features, societal integration in Japan, and ethnic identity as key factors shaping transnational engagement. Results suggest that Zainichi Koreans function as active transnational agents rather than a territorially bounded diaspora restricted to Japan, maintaining multifaceted connections with both Korea and Japan. Considerable generational and demographic variability emerged, exemplified by instances where third-generation Zainichi were younger than some members of the fifth generation, reflecting the complexity of their life-course paths.

Gender-based differences were evident: women exhibited higher levels of economic and political transnational engagement and demonstrated greater political integration than men. Nationality further emerged as a significant factor, as Japanese nationals reported greater involvement in economic, political, and sociocultural domains, displayed higher sociocultural integration and maintained a stronger Korean ethnic identity in comparison to Korean nationals. Notably, respondents whose parents were both Japanese nationals reported the most pronounced sense of Korean ethnic identity, indicating that ethnic attachment may persist regardless of parental nationality.

Age and length of residence showed opposing effects: younger respondents indicated higher levels of engagement, while a longer period of residence in Japan correlated positively with engagement levels. Both socioeconomic and political integration were positive predictors of transnational engagement, with a strong Korean ethnic identity consistently emerging as the most salient predictor across all domains. Further analysis within each domain revealed that political integration substantially predicted economic engagement; socioeconomic and political integration jointly affected political engagement; and sociocultural engagement was enhanced by both socioeconomic integration and a strong

ethnic identity.

Moderation analysis indicated that nationality influenced the association between sociocultural integration and engagement: among Korean nationals, higher sociocultural integration corresponded to substantially greater engagement, while for Japanese nationals, no such association was detected, despite their overall higher engagement levels.

Implications and Significance

The finding that Japanese nationality holders among Zainichi Koreans exhibit stronger Korean ethnic identity and higher levels of transnational engagement than their Korean nationality counterparts warrants careful interpretation. Rather than indicating a contradiction to assimilation, this pattern suggests that nationality may function less as a marker of cultural incorporation and more as an institutional resource that expands opportunities for cross-border participation. Prior research has shown that legal status and citizenship can enhance mobility, access to political and economic institutions, and participation in transnational social fields, thereby facilitating sustained homeland-oriented practices (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999; Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1994).

From a post-diasporic perspective, secure legal membership in the host society may also create conditions under which ethnic identity is more freely explored and selectively expressed. In this sense, institutional incorporation may indirectly support sustained transnational engagement by stabilizing individuals' social position in the host society. Once formal belonging is stabilized through naturalization, individuals may experience reduced pressure to demonstrate cultural conformity, enabling ethnic identity to function as a symbolic and relational resource rather than an inherited obligation (Gans 1979; Levitt and Waters 2002; Waters 1990). Moreover, experiences of persistent racialization and boundary-making in Japanese society may contribute to the continued salience of ethnic attachment even after formal incorporation, aligning with prior findings on reactive ethnicity among later-generation minorities (Portes and Zhou 1993; Rumbaut 2008). Taken together, these results underscore that, within the distinctive historical and sociopolitical context of Japan, naturalization among Zainichi Koreans does not necessarily weaken ethnic identity or transnational engagement but may, under certain conditions, be associated with

sustained levels of ethnic identity and transnational engagement—a pattern that may not readily generalize to overseas Korean populations in other national contexts.

From a policy standpoint, these findings suggest that Zainichi Koreans possess considerable potential to act as cultural, political, and economic intermediaries between Korea and Japan. Recognizing and supporting their dual affiliations—rather than framing nationality choice as a zero-sum indicator of loyalty—could facilitate bilateral cooperation, enhance cultural exchange, and strengthen economic and social networks between the two countries. Policies that acknowledge and leverage the transnational capacities of long-settled migrant populations may therefore yield benefits that extend beyond integration outcomes alone.

For the reasons discussed above, this study offers three major contributions to the literature. First, it redefines Zainichi Koreans by shifting the focus from a settled diaspora to active transnational agents, thereby advancing migration theory in the areas of identity formation and cross-border practices. Second, by analyzing transnational engagement through economic, political, and sociocultural dimensions, the study unveils domain-specific factors and elucidates how ethnic identity and host-society integration function as key explanatory variables shaping patterns of transnational engagement. Third, the unexpected finding that Zainichi Koreans with Japanese nationality may maintain higher levels of engagement than those with Korean nationality provides novel insights into the processes of naturalization and the ongoing significance of ethnic identity.

Although the findings demonstrate strong associations among ethnic identity, host-society integration, and transnational engagement, the cross-sectional design does not permit definitive conclusions regarding causal directionality or reciprocity. It remains theoretically plausible that sustained transnational participation may also reinforce ethnic identification or reshape patterns of integration over time. Future longitudinal research would be necessary to examine these potential reciprocal dynamics more rigorously.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Despite these strengths, certain limitations require acknowledgment. First, reliance on an online survey may have resulted in overrepresentation of

individuals with a strong interest in Korean heritage or transnational issues, which could elevate reported engagement. Second, the cross-sectional research design hinders the ability to draw causal conclusions. Third, although the study considers demographic and generational distinctions, it does not fully address relevant factors such as socioeconomic standing in Japan, bilingual ability, or comprehensive migration trajectories.

To address these limitations, future research should utilize longitudinal approaches to observe how transnational engagement evolves over time and in reaction to shifts in migration policy or regional geopolitical dynamics. Comparative analyses between Zainichi Koreans and other longstanding migrant populations in East Asia may provide wider contextual understanding.

In addition, future research should move beyond a bilateral framework centered on Japan and Korea to examine more complex, multi-sited forms of transnational engagement that may involve multiple countries or regions, reflecting increasingly diversified mobility trajectories and social networks among some Zainichi Koreans. Such dynamics were beyond the scope of the present study due to data constraints but represent an important direction for further inquiry.

Qualitative strategies—including in-depth interviews and ethnographic studies—would shed light on the subjective interpretations, motivations, and structural constraints shaping patterns of engagement. Additionally, closer scrutiny of the influence of digital communication and social media on sustaining transnational networks is essential, particularly for younger cohorts.

In conclusion, this study shows that Zainichi Koreans illustrate a dynamic model of transnationalism, with ethnic identity serving as the central force while nationality, gender, and integration direct its various manifestations. Rather than being a passive diaspora, they actively maintain and redefine Korea-Japan connections, carrying significance for both academic inquiry and policy development.

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Abstract

This study explores the influence of ethnic identity on the transnational engagement of young Zainichi Koreans within contemporary Japan. Although prior scholarship largely adopted static diaspora perspectives, this research foregrounds the dynamic, multidimensional identity practices of third- to fifth-generation Zainichi individuals in their 20s and 30s. Data were obtained via an online survey administered in November 2024, comprising 170 respondents. The study utilized a structured questionnaire to assess ethnic identity, varying levels of integration into Japanese society, and economic, political, and sociocultural aspects of transnational engagement. Statistical analyses, such as correlation and multiple regression, were conducted to evaluate the research model. To complement the survey findings and to provide contextual understanding of patterns that are difficult to capture through quantitative measures alone, three semi-structured interviews were conducted between January and February 2025 with participants selected to reflect variation in nationality status and generational background. Findings indicate that a strong ethnic identity positively correlates with elevated transnational engagement across all examined domains. While higher levels of integration into Japanese society do not uniformly suppress transnational engagement, certain dimensions of structural incorporation function as enabling resources that facilitate sustained cross-border practices. Sociodemographic variables such as generation, nationality, and family background significantly moderate these associations. This research underscores that young Zainichi Koreans are actively constructing hybrid, digitally mediated identities in their daily transnational lives, thereby challenging traditional diaspora paradigms. These results extend current discussions on migrant integration, identity negotiation, and the significance of transnationalism for post-diasporic generations.

Keywords: Zainichi Koreans, diaspora, ethnic identity, integration, transnational engagement