

East Asian International Students' Attitudes Toward Gender Studies in U.S. Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract: East Asian international students and gender studies courses are both popular topics in American higher education today. However, little attention has been paid to the performance of East Asian international students in gender studies courses. Therefore, this study explores the attitudes and participation of East Asian international students toward Gender Studies in U.S. higher education institutions. Through a mixed-methods approach, including literature review and interviews, this research identifies the key factors that influence these students' engagement with Gender Studies. The findings suggest that cultural differences, traditional gender norms, and misunderstandings about the relevance of Gender Studies courses contribute to low participation rates. Additionally, the study reveals that many East Asian students, particularly those in STEM fields, avoid Gender Studies due to its perceived theoretical focus and the requirement for extensive writing. By addressing these barriers, educators can develop more inclusive strategies to encourage participation and foster critical thinking skills, contributing to the development of global citizens.

Keywords: International Student, Gender Study, Higher education, East Asian Culture.

1. Introduction

Gender Studies is one of the most popular topics in American higher education in recent years [1]. It covers topics such as gender identity, gender expression, and gender relations, involving a wide range of theories such as feminist theory, queer theory, gender equality, and LGBTQ+(lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning) Studies [2]. Gender Studies are significant in many subjects. In fields such as sociology, education, history, and politics, Gender Studies can be used to deconstruct social structures and explore how these structures shape the life experiences of individuals and groups. In-depth research on these topics will not only help shed light on inequalities in society, but also drive improvements in policy making and educational practices that promote a more equitable and inclusive social environment.

There is a growing interest in Gender Studies, but research on how East Asian international students view and participate in gender studies in U.S. higher education is limited. It is important for educators to know their attitudes and understanding towards Gender Studies due to the cultural differences and the fact that they receive different sex education in their home countries than in the United States [3].

In order to understand East Asian international students' attitudes toward and participation in gender studies in U.S. higher education, this research will address two research questions: 1) What

are East Asian international students' attitudes toward Gender Studies in U.S. higher education institutions; 2) What factors influence East Asian international students' participation in Gender Studies courses in U.S. colleges and universities. This research will use a mixed methods approach, combining literature review and interviews to collect the quantitative data needed to address the research questions. This research can help educators and institutions better support international students in participating in Gender Studies courses. The results of this research can not only benefit current and future international students, but also provide a reference for higher education to develop more culturally inclusive and ethnically diverse courses.

2. East Asian Students in US Higher Education

With the rise in the importance of higher education and the development of globalization, international education has become one of the most popular forms of education in East Asian countries. In 2019, East Asian students accounted for a large portion of the international student population in the United States, with more than 370,000 students enrolled [4]. Despite the large number of East Asian international students, the participation and attitudes of East Asian students from countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea in studying gender studies in the United States remain underexplored. In order to create a more inclusive and diverse higher education environment, Gender Studies can help cultivate students' critical thinking and challenge traditional stereotypes.

3. Evolution of Gender Studies

Gender Studies(GS) originated from Women's Studies(WS), but each has its own specific focus. Women's Studies began in the 1960s as part of the feminist movement, it focuses on women's history, social roles, gender inequality, and feminist theory. It aims to challenge the traditional academic fields that overlooked women's contributions and experiences, promoting social change by exposing and analyzing gender inequalities within societal structures [5].

Later, Gender Studies emerged from Women's Studies and expanded its scope. While Women's Studies primarily focuses on women, Gender Studies addresses a wider range of topics, including all other gender identities, gender expression, and gender relations. It also includes research on LGBTQ+ communities, exploring issues of gender identity and diversity. Both Gender Studies and Women's Studies examines how gender interacts with race, sexual orientation, and other identities, making them a more complex and interdisciplinary field within the humanities [6].

4. Gender Studies Curriculum in U.S. Higher Education Institutions

Today, Gender Studies has become an established academic field in many U.S. higher education institutions. The curriculum is designed to offer students multidimensional perspectives on gender, develop their critical thinking skills, and encourage them to actively promote social justice and gender equality. Typically, Gender Studies courses fall into four main categories: Feminism, LGBTQ+ Studies, Introductory Social Sciences, and Global Comparisons [7].

Feminism courses delve into feminist theory, covering topics from early feminist movements to contemporary, diverse feminist perspectives. Students learn about different feminist ideologies and explore how these theories apply to real-world issues [8].

Many Gender Studies courses are included in various social sciences to help students build a foundational understanding of gender, gender roles, and gender inequality. These introductory social sciences courses examine gender as a social structure and its intersection with other identities. Often situated within sociology, anthropology, and education, these courses encourage students to apply the theories learned in class to their specific fields of study [9].

The category of LGBTQ+ Studies includes courses that explore gender identity and sexual orientation, with a particular focus on the history, rights, and challenges faced by LGBTQ+ communities. Through these courses, students gain a deeper understanding of gender diversity and fluidity [10].

Besides these, many Gender Studies programs also focus on transnational and cross-cultural comparisons, studying gender issues in different contexts. These global comparison courses aim to help students understand the impact of globalization on gender relations and how to promote gender equality across various cultural backgrounds [11].

5. Methodology

5.1. Method

The purpose of this research is to collect information about the attitudes and engagement of East Asian international students in Gender Studies courses. Therefore, interviews will be used as the primary method to collect stories from East Asian international students. The researcher will explore their stories related to gender studies in American higher education institutions. A qualitative approach is centered on collecting detailed data through observations, interviews, or even focus groups. Through interview methods, The main goal is to collect data on the attitudes and engagement of East Asian international students in Gender Studies courses from the same school and the stories of students who have participated in these course.

5.2. Participants

The sample for this research is a purposive sampling. In a non-probability sample, the researcher defines a subgroup with specific characteristics that match the needs of their study. The researcher invited East Asian international students from the same school who had just graduated or graduated for one year as participants. All respondents were from three East Asian countries, China, Japan and South Korea. Since the research requires students to recall their college experiences. Students who have graduated too long may find it difficult to remember all the stories, and students who have not yet graduated may not have enough opportunities to choose gender studies courses. However, this will be easier for those who have just graduated for about a year. Also, they all have four years of college time, and their memories of college are clear enough. This is the main reason why the researcher only chose this part of students.

5.3. Data Collection

The interviews were estimated to take the participants about 30 minutes. However, because the interviews were semi-structured, three of the interviews took about 40 minutes. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewee the freedom to direct the conversation in the way they feel most comfortable. To provide some guidance for the interviews, the interviewer created an interview guide. This guide allowed the interviewer to provide some structure to the interview and a list of topics to ask (Table 1). The information the researcher needed was the story of their higher education experience, and it was difficult for the researcher to ask them questions about every aspect. The semi-structured interview ensured that the interviewer obtained the information the researcher absolutely needed to know, while also providing the interviewee with the opportunity to continue to share any information they wanted me to know more about.

Table 1: Interview Guide

1. Self-Introduction(nationality, major, graduation year...)	
2. Attitude towards gender studies courses	
3. Understanding of gender studies courses	
4. Have you taken related courses?	
5. Yes or No?	
5.1 If took them at least once: Focus on their course experience. Any memorable stories. Reasons of taking these course.	5.2 If never: Mainly talk about what they think about gender studies courses. Reasons of not taking courses
6. Topics related to gender studies, free to add	

After selecting whether they had taken a gender studies course, all questions were open-ended to allow the interviewee to control the conversation (Table 2). The questions were divided into three parts to help understand the attitudes and experiences of East Asian international students related to gender studies courses. The first part was about the overall attitudes of East Asian international students towards American higher education and gender studies. The second part was about their understanding of the gender studies course at the school. The last part was about how they thought gender studies courses should be established and promoted.

Table 2: Interview Protocol

Introduction: I want to start by thanking you for participating in the study and for taking the time to answer my questions about gender studies, and your college experiences. Please review the consent form and let me know if you have any questions. May I have your permission to record our interview using an audio capturing device? The main goal of this interview is to collect data on attitudes and engagement of East Asian international students in Gender Studies courses from the same school and stories of students who have participated in these course. I am interested in hearing about your perception. If you allow me to record our interview, then our interview will start after I click the start button. Part 1: Please introduce yourself. What is your major when you was in our college? When did you graduated? Where are you from? What is the overall attitude when people talk about gender&sex in your country? Do you think you receive enough education about gender&sex in your country? Did you receive any gender or sex education in your country? How's it feel? Do you think it is important for children to learn gender&sex knowledge in school? What do you think a gender studies course should look like? Do you think this is an important subject in higher education?
Part 2: Did you ever take any gender studies courses when you was college student? Yes-- Go Part 2.1 No-- Go Part 2.2 Part 2.1:

Table 2: (continued).

How many courses have you taken? What are they? Why did you choose these courses? Which is your favorite one? Why? What is/are the course/courses look like? Class setting? Participant? Why do you think it is like that? Before taking these courses, what did you think they would be like? And what was the reality? Which aspects matched your expectations, and which were different? Do you feel that these courses have been helpful to you? Anything significant? Is there any interesting stories in these classes you want to share with me? Part 2.2: Why not? What is the class look like for you? If you think it is the problems with these courses that are causing you not to want to take any of these courses, do you have any suggestions?
Part 3: In you opinion, oo East Asian international students have a high level of participation in gender studies courses? Why do you think this is the case? If you are a policy maker or educator, what would you do to promote gender studies courses?
Closing Remarks: Lastly, Is there anything about these topics that I did not ask you that you would like to share? Thank you so much for your time! It has been a pleasure speaking with you today. I can keep you updated on this research and send you a final copy of my work if you are interested. I will also reach out to you if I need to clarify any points that you've shared as I begin analyzing the data. Is that okay with you? Thanks again.

5.4. Data Analysis

After reviewing all the interview records and summarizing the data, the researcher classified all the participants' stories and opinions into three types. They are positive, neutral, and negative. They not only represent the respondents' positive attitude towards gender studies courses, but also their positive participation in the courses. This means that different data of one respondent may be summarized in different themes. For example, a student may be interested in the subject of gender studies, but the student does not plan to participate in any such courses. Then the content about his/her interest in gender studies will be summarized in the "positive" theme, while the part about him/her not planning to participate in gender studies courses will be summarized in "negative". For the theme of "neutral", any part without a clear attitude will be summarized in this part. For example, a student may have no knowledge of gender studies courses, so he/she is not sure whether he/she will be interested in it. Then this kind of data will also be summarized in "neutral".

6. Findings

After all the data was sorted, the researcher found that although most of the respondents did not have a negative opinion of gender studies, their participation in gender studies courses was generally low. Only one student took the gender studies course on his own initiative, and more than one class. There

were seven students who had never participated in the gender studies course. The remaining two students participated because the gender studies course was the only suitable elective course.

Among the ten interviewees, only two expressed negative attitudes towards gender studies and its courses, while only one student participated in these courses positively. This means that the low participation of East Asian international students in gender studies courses is due to many other reasons.

6.1. Negative Attitudes Toward Gender Studies

Two students think that gender studies are meaningless. They think that gender studies is a completely theoretical subject and it cannot provide any practical help to society. In the culture of East Asian countries, clear definitions of gender roles are deeply rooted in these societies, and men are often seen as the beneficiaries [12]. This situation is very similar to a phenomenon that happened in racial studies. Many white people feel uncomfortable when faced with racial issues because these discussions criticize their existence as beneficiaries in the system of racial oppression. This discomfort may cause them to avoid or resist participating in race-related courses. This situation is called "white fragility"[13].

6.2. Misunderstandings about the Audience of Gender Studies Courses

Many students have misunderstandings about gender studies courses, thinking that such courses are only relevant to female students and sexual minorities. Many cisgender straight male students choose not to participate in the course because they are worried that the course is boring or meaningless. However, misunderstandings were not limited to male students. Many female students also had misunderstandings. Compared with the concerns and embarrassment of male students, several female respondents did not take any related courses because they were too confident about the content of gender studies courses.

"I think it's worthwhile for everyone to take gender studies courses if they have the opportunity, especially for boys who may not have known about gender studies at all. In fact, women's rights and sexual minorities are all worth knowing more about... I haven't taken these courses, but I guess I should understand the content of the courses. I feel that it's a bit unnecessary to spend tuition on what I know." - Student Q

Whether male or female, East Asian international students have common misunderstandings about gender studies courses. Male students often think that these courses are irrelevant to them because of their gender identity. However, female students may give up the opportunity to study further because they think they already understand the course content. These misunderstandings have led to insufficient participation in gender studies courses for East Asian international students and hindered students' comprehensive understanding of gender issues.

6.3. The Embarrassing Situation of STEM Students

In fact, according to data, 49% of international students from Asia are majoring in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) [14]. Gender studies, as part of the humanities, are indeed not attractive enough to them. After completing a required humanities course for graduation, they rarely choose any humanities-related courses.

"I prefer exams as my finals, which have standard answers and don't require you to use your brain much. I am lazy and don't want to write papers" - Student S

"I don't want to write papers for my homework or finals. I chose STEM just to avoid writing so much." - Student D

For STEM students, gender studies courses are often very different from the courses they are good at and accustomed to. In addition to exams and writing papers, whether there are standard answers and central theories keep STEM students away from gender studies courses. Although STEM students mentioned that they need to complete a humanities course to graduate, they usually choose the easiest introductory course instead of gender studies courses.

7. Discussion

After discovering the reasons for the low enthusiasm of East Asian international students in gender studies courses, the researcher proposed several potential ways to improve the participation and progress of East Asian international students in gender studies courses by referring to the transcripts of respondents with relatively high participation.

First, educators can try to be more inclusive of men and other groups who feel uncomfortable with gender studies in course design. When talking about students in gender studies courses, student J, a respondent who has participated in multiple gender studies courses, mentioned the experience of often being the only male in the class. *"I have invited my male friends to take these classes with me many times, but the courses are really not attractive to them. We rarely really discuss straight men, and even if we do, we only talk about masculinity, and I don't think we like masculinity."* Therefore, the researcher suggested that introducing more neutral or positive topics related to men in the course, or opening a special course to explore what men can do in gender inequality, will help attract more male students to participate. In addition, professors should encourage an inclusive and diverse discussion atmosphere in the classroom to reduce their resistance to gender studies.

In addition, the researcher believes that it is also important to eliminate the misunderstandings of East Asian international students about gender studies courses. Student F expressed her change in attitude towards gender studies courses in the interview. She said: *"I took the gender studies course first because it was one of my electives. I had read a lot of things related to feminism, so I took this course thinking it would be easy. But after I finished it, I found that gender studies was actually more profound than I thought. But unfortunately, it was already the last semester."* When the interviewer asked her if she would like to take more gender studies courses if she could, she gave a positive answer. Therefore, the researcher suggested that educators adopt more active promotion strategies. For example, lectures and seminars on gender studies can be provided when international students are admitted to the school, introducing the wide applicability of the subject and its help to students of all genders. These lectures can invite East Asian international students who have successfully completed gender studies courses to share their learning experiences to reduce misunderstandings and resistance.

Finally, for students in STEM fields, making it a required course may be one of the best ways. Just as student X took the gender studies course to complete the requirements of his major. Making gender studies one of the required courses for students in STEM majors would be an effective improvement measure. In addition, the reason why East Asian international students are mostly in the STEM field is also closely related to the fact that they are usually non-native English speakers [15]. Therefore, reducing the requirement for essay writing in gender studies courses can effectively increase the participation of East Asian international students in gender studies courses.

8. Conclusion

In general, the research finds that East Asian international students have low participation in gender studies courses, mainly due to misunderstandings of the course and identification with traditional gender roles. To increase the participation of East Asian international students in gender studies courses, educators need to pay more attention to cultural sensitivity in course design and promotion

and provide more support and guidance to students to eliminate their misunderstandings and promote broader academic participation.

It is undeniable that this study is not perfect. Since this study only studied Middle Eastern international students in one school, this may lead to the study not being sufficiently universal. It is recommended that other researchers study more schools in the future and confirm new findings and conclusions to better help international students learn about gender studies.

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