



## Article

# The Current Status and Challenges of Templestay Programs in Korean Buddhism

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**Abstract:** Templestay is a Korean program where participants have the chance to stay in a Buddhist temple and explore the historic buildings, statues, and natural surroundings of the temple grounds, while experiencing meditation and Buddhist rituals first-hand. Launched in 2002, approximately six million participants have attended Templestay programs over the last 20 years. However, in contrast to the great successes during the first ten years of the program's existence, the last ten years have met with a significant decline in rates of participation. The aim of this article is to investigate the rise and fall in these figures to better understand the current wants and needs of participants and to consider the future of the Templestay program. Through an analysis of statistics garnered by the Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism and a review of research studies on the growth and development of Templestay, this article considers why the program has recently been in decline and suggests how this may be remedied. Particular attention is given to how the needs of diverse participants can be met within a religious environment. In the conclusion, this article suggests that the number of participants may be increased with the implementation of programs more universally applied across all Templestay sites. Furthermore, critical concerns about over-commercialization are warranted insofar as marketing compromises the sense of authenticity sought by participants.

**Keywords:** Templestay; Korean Buddhism; religion and tourism; Buddhist programs; well-being programs



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## 1. Introduction

Templestay is a cultural program in South Korea (hereafter, Korea) where participants can stay in a Buddhist temple and experience elements of monastic daily life, including meditation practice and religious services as well as sightseeing around the temple and surrounding environment. From its outset, the program was given the name “Templestay” in English, not in Korean, making it accessible to international participants and thus a means for nurturing international tourism as well as providing exposure to Korean Buddhist culture. Templestay started with the original purpose of supplementing accommodation facilities while providing experiences of Korean traditional culture to those visiting Korea at the time of the 2002 FIFA World Cup. During the 2003 Summer Universiade, also known as the World University Games, visitors to Korea cited Templestay as one of their most memorable experiences (Boo and Bang 2013, p. 166). Since then, continuous financial support from the government has been provided to foster Templestay programs. In 2004, the Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism (hereafter, CCKB) was established by the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism as an operative body dedicated to running Templestay. Since 2007, this institution has grown rapidly as the number of temples offering Templestay has greatly increased (Je 2016, p. 1). In 2009, Templestay was rated as a world-class cultural tourism destination by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) 2009, pp. 115–27).

The cumulative number of Templestay participants from 2002 to 2021 is 6,014,737, of which foreigners account for 11% or 656,908 of the participants (Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism 2022, p. 20). For foreign visitors, Templestay has provided an opportunity

to experience various elements of Korean Buddhist culture, including first-hand experiences that go beyond viewing-oriented tourism. Such participatory elements include programs in meditation, *yebul* (religious ritual), and *darye* (tea ceremony). These elements have proven to be popular with foreign participants (Cho and Kim 2022, pp. 43–53) and thus constitute the core of the available programs although, as shall be expressed below, there are others.

In 2004, the Korean government introduced a five-day/40 h workweek. This reduction in working hours has led to an increase in leisure time, which, it has been estimated, influenced the increase in the number of Korean participants (Song et al. 2014, p. 240). Additionally, Templestay has been praised for the opportunity it provides for psychological stability, self-reflection, and relaxation, which is in line with the growing interest in meditation, mindfulness, and yoga in Korea. In fact, emotional relaxation and stress relief through meditation are among the main motivations for Templestay participants (Oh and Choi 2021, p. 160). Moreover, interest in the psychological benefits of Buddhist practices is increasing due to the recent pandemic, leading people to pay ever more attention to the healing culture surrounding such exercises as yoga and meditation (Yang and Lee 2021, p. 54). Given the interest in/need for psychological stress reduction through meditation practice, the role of Templestay is likely to remain important in the future at least insofar as it offers benefits regarding psychological well-being.

Templestay programs have been recognized as one of Korea's leading tourist attractions and have thus been the subject of active research in academia (Boo and Bang 2013, p. 167). However, since 2016, there has been a sharp decline in this research (Kang and Chung 2019, p. 404). Furthermore, despite the rapid growth and increasing number of participants between 2002 and 2011, these numbers have dwindled over the past ten years (Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism 2022, p. 20). Moreover, the rate of return guests also continues to fall (Yang and Kim 2020, p. 6).

Over the past 20 years, Templestay programs have been attended by approximately 6 million people, including both locals and foreigners. Furthermore, scenes with famous actors and celebrities participating in Templestay programs have been aired on national television and YouTube. Be that as it may, related research and program participation is on a downward trend. Additionally, of the existing research on Templestay, the majority has focused on the program's popularity and effectiveness, and there has been little research on program limitations to help explain the recent decrease in popularity. Therefore, this study focuses on explaining this decrease in popularity considering any limitations the program may have and offers some suggestions as to how growth may be stimulated. Such discussions are meant to help analyze any shortcomings and ensure an effective and sustainable program for the future.

## 2. Templestay: 20 Years of Growth and Development

Before examining the status of Templestay, it is necessary to define and introduce the program in detail. CCKB defines and introduces Templestay as “a cultural experience program for a better understanding Korean traditional culture and Korean Buddhism. This short temple stays including chanting, meditation, conversation over tea, and Buddhist meals will give you a new perspective on your life. We hope you find your ‘True-self’ while staying at a temple” (Templestay 2022b). Although Templestay has been defined by CCKB in this way, definitions vary across studies.

Previous studies have defined Templestay, emphasizing three main terms, experiential stay, program, and cultural experience. First, experiential stay in the context of Templestay has been defined as staying in a temple for a short or long period of time to participate in daily temple activities such as *yebul* (religious rituals), *chamseon* (Seon meditation), *darye* (tea ceremony), and *barwoogongyang* (Buddhist meals with traditional bowls) that are already performed in traditional Korean temple (Hur 2004, p. 2). Alternatively, it has been described as ‘accommodations that combine Korean traditional culture and Buddhist culture’ (MCST (Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism) 2021). Those who re-

fer to Templestay as a program have defined it as ‘a program for experiencing the culture of a mountain temple while living with monks in the temple for more than one night and two days’ (Kim 2005, p. 68) or as ‘a program where members of the public can stay at a traditional temple and experience temple life, traditional Buddhist culture, tea ceremony, meditation and more’ (Kim 2011, p. 623). Finally, Templestay defined with an emphasis on cultural experience has been described as ‘a comprehensive cultural experience that involves understanding and experiencing tangible and intangible things such as temple activities, temple buildings, and Buddhist statues’ (Kim and Yoon 2008, p. 131). Alternatively, it has been described as a ‘cultural experience which may include, spiritual practice, leisure by disengaging from daily life, and the experience of traditional culture by becoming more familiar with Buddhist life’ (Jung 2010, p. 168). Based on these six descriptions, the primary elements of Templestay are experience and traditional culture.

In 2002, approximately 11,714 visitors participated in Templestay at 33 temples across Korea. Since then, the program has grown steadily (Kang and Chung 2019, p. 407), with the number of temples offering the program increasing by an average of 13.2% per year. As of 2021, a total of 142 temples offer the Templestay program (Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism 2022, p. 20). As a result of these achievements, Templestay was awarded the grand prize at the International Tourism Fair in Berlin in 2008. The following year, the program was recognized as a successful tourism attraction by the OECD. Following this, in 2010, the Presidential Council on Nation Branding designated Templestay as one of the top ten icons representing Korea (Boo and Bang 2013, p. 166).

The effective growth of this program has in large part been due to the systematic operation of the CCKB launched in 2004 (Yang and Kim 2020, p. 8), coupled with the implementation of the five-day work week which was initiated that same year. Moreover, the increased interest in meditation, especially for purposes of psychological healing, has also been credited for its growth (Yang and Lee 2019, p. 23). Government support has also been an essential factor in developing Templestay. Through the Tourism Promotion and Development Fund, the government provided a total of KRW 175 billion (over USD 130 million) by 2015, supplying increasingly larger amounts of funding over time (KRW 1.1 billion in 2002, followed by KRW 15 billion in 2007 and KRW 20 billion in 2012). These funds were used to secure dedicated spaces, maintain facilities, and support temple operations (Park 2017a, pp. 413–14).

Considering the number of Templestay participants and operating temples in more detail, 33 temples were first designated as Templestay operating temples in 2002, followed by a gradual increase to 74 just five years later (2007). There were 118 operating temples in 2010 and as of 2021, there are 141 temples currently providing Templestay programs (Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism 2022, p. 19). Compared to the number of active temples in 2002, the number of recent operational temples has increased by more than 400%. Furthermore, the regions where operational temples are located are evenly spread across the country, with the province of Gyeonggi-do having the most with 22 (15.5%). This is followed by Jeollanam-do with 20 (14.8%), Gyeongsangbuk-do with 16 (11.3%), Gangwon-do with 14 (9.9%), and Seoul with 13 (9.2%). Twenty-eight of these 141 temples offer services in English to accommodate foreign visitors (Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism 2022, p. 19).

As for the number of yearly participants, there was a total of 11,714 visitors in 2002, (5196 Koreans and 6518 foreigners), 102,755 locals and 4755 foreigners in 2003, 225,578 locals and 32,937 foreigners in 2008, 382,157 locals and 37,403 foreigners in 2011, 416,454 locals and 70,910 foreigners in 2017, and 458,730 locals and 529,250 foreigners in 2019. However, in 2020, during the pandemic, attendance dropped sharply to 230,888 locals and 7500 foreigners due to concerns about social distancing and the spread of infection. These figures and others regarding rates of Templestay participation are reported more thoroughly in the Table 1 below in accordance with Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism (2022, p. 20). Additionally, of the foreign visitors, the American nationals had the highest number of participants with 27,264 visiting between 2017 and 2021. The next most common nationality participating was France with 11,464 individuals, followed by 9985 from China, 7029 from Germany,

7275 from Vietnam, 4768 from the United Kingdom, 4015 from Japan, 3611 from Canada, 3469 from Singapore, 3829 from Russia, 3388 from Australia, 3160 from Thailand, 2096 from Taiwan, 2067 from the Philippines, and, finally, 2071 from Spain. While growth in participation averaged roughly 25% per year from 2005 to 2010, 2013 marked the first single-digit growth rate at 7%. Growth has remained low ever since, with overall growth on the decline ([Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism 2022](#), p. 20).

**Table 1.** The number of temples and participant statistics by year of Templestay.

Year	Number of Temples	Domestic Participants		Foreign Participants	
		Participants by Year	Growth Rate	Participants by Year	Growth Rate
2002	33	5196		6518	-
2003	16	102,755	1878%	4755	−27.1%
2004	36	103,218	0.45%	7414	55.92%
2005	41	107,247	3.90%	11,206	51.15%
2006	50	134,613	25.52%	14,563	29.96%
2007	74	170,506	26.66%	25,650	76.13%
2008	87	225,578	32.30%	32,937	28.41%
2009	102	279,418	23.87%	31,426	−4.59%
2010	109	335,832	20.19%	30,392	−3.29%
2011	118	382,157	13.79%	37,403	23.07%
2012	109	316,303	−17.2%	40,177	7.42%
2013	114	345,579	9.26%	37,095	−7.67%
2014	110	331,620	−4.04%	42,334	14.12%
2015	122	363,124	9.50%	46,525	9.90%
2016	123	358,965	−1.15%	55,787	19.91%
2017	137	416,454	16.02%	70,910	27.11%
2018	135	438,327	5.25%	77,091	8.72%
2019	137	458,730	4.66%	70,520	−8.52%
2020	139	230,888	−49.67%	7500	−89.36%
2021	141	251,319	8.85%	6705	−10.60%
Total participants		5,357,829		656,908	
Grand total				6,014,737	

These figures were presented during the 2022 seminar on 20 years of Templestay achievements and the direction of future developments ([Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism 2022](#), p. 20).

Despite the recent decline in growth, Templestay continues to be a valuable representative of cultural tourism in Korea. One reason for this is that many temples house cultural assets that reflect Korean history. Of the 8840 cultural properties designated by the government, a total of 3144 are Buddhist-related, and of the 17,776 cultural properties designated as national treasures, 1129 are reported as Buddhist cultural properties ([Chun and Kim 2012](#), p. 27). Of these properties, some of the most important are Seokguram Grotto, Bulguksa Temple, and Haeinsa Temple, which houses the Tripitaka Koreana woodblocks, designated a world heritage site in 1995 ([UNESCO 2022](#)). Such sites are representative of Buddhist architecture and often contain pieces of Buddhist artwork, including statues and paintings, which are an important draw for tourists and serve as an introduction to Korean traditional culture for locals and foreigners alike. Moreover, many Buddhist temples are also located in the mountains, the natural beauty of which has proven very popular among visitors.

Another key to the successful development of Templestay includes first-hand experiences, offered when participants are guided in meditation practice (*chamseon*), introduced to Buddhist services (*yebul*), and able to eat with Buddhist monks/nuns from alms bowls (*barwoogongyang*). Such experiential-based activities have similarities with programs at Plum Village in France, founded by Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh, and Mahasi Sasana Yeiktha Meditation Centre, a leading international practice center in Myanmar (Ahn et al. 2012, p. 77). These experiential-based elements of the Templestay program were found to be popular with both locals and foreigners (Chun and Kim 2012, p. 36). However, as mentioned above, the growth rate of the number of Templestay participants exploded from 2002 to 2012 and has been declining ever since. Notably, 2014 saw the first negative growth rate at  $-2.28\%$  (Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism 2022, p. 20). Given that the rate of growth has not significantly increased since 2014 (2019 saw a growth rate of a mere  $2.68\%$ ) this suggests that Templestay is in need of modification. The next section will analyze what the motivation has been for past participants to enroll in Templestay in an attempt to offer suggestions to remedy the hardships had over the past ten years.

### 3. Templestay Program Details

The programs as presented on the Templestay website (<https://www.templestay.com>, (accessed on 20 November 2022)) are managed by the CCKB. These programs are divided into three types, including a one-day stay, an experience-oriented stay, and a rest-oriented stay. The one-day stay is a program that allows visitors who are unable to stay for the full two days and one night. Normally, this program enables visitors to choose from among three activities: a temple tour, meditation practice, and a tea ceremony. The experience-oriented stay typically lasts for a minimum of one night. As the website explains, this program varies slightly from season to season and temple to temple, but highlights include early morning chanting, 108 prostrations, Buddhist meals with traditional bowls (*barwoogongyang*), and meditation (*chamseon*). Finally, the rest-oriented stay is an open-ended stay that is not structured or organized by the temple. In this case, visitors are invited to come and rest based on their own needs and schedule. They are first given a tour of the temple and introduced to temple etiquette, but after this, their time is their own (Templestay 2022a).

The main activities included in the programs are the temple tour, meditation (*chamseon*, 參禪, 참선), the tea ceremony (*darye*, 茶禮, 다례), eating with monks/nuns from traditional alms bowls (*barwoogongyang*, 鉢盂供養, 발우공양), and, finally, Buddhist services of worship (*yebul*, 禮佛, 예불). First, the temple tour serves as an introduction to the grounds while describing various relics, artifacts, monuments, and/or pieces of art that are housed there. The tour also includes an explanation of the architecture including the various symbols and icons painted throughout (*dancheong*, 丹青, 단청). At this time, visitors will also be shown their accommodations and amenities as well as taught about temple etiquette. Next is *chamseon* meditation, a traditional practice of Korean Buddhism that allows one to observe their true nature or *jinseong* (眞性, 진성). Meditation is typically done seated in the traditional Korean style of *ganhwa* (看話, 간화) practice. Thirdly, the tea ceremony is a form of meditation where visitors practice mindfulness and concentration through the brewing and drinking of tea. This is described with the phrase *daseonilmi* (茶禪一味, 다선일미), which translates literally to tea and meditation are of the same taste. This practice encourages participants to engage with all five senses as they prepare and consume their drinks. The fourth activity is communal eating with traditional bowls, known as *barwoo*. This practice is characterized by a sense of appreciation for nature and the etiquette of not wasting any food. Participants are often encouraged to save a piece of radish until all other food has been eaten, at which time the radish can be used to wipe down the bowl, collecting all morsels to finally be eaten. Moreover, cleaning the bowls and putting them away is in and of itself an important part of the practice. Finally, the observance of religious ceremonies or rituals is done daily, which visitors are welcome to attend. Ceremonies practiced



at dawn and dusk to pay respect to the Buddha and bodhisattvas and pray for peace in the world are the most commonly attended. At this time, participants may practice with the monks and nuns by prostrating 108 times (Templestay 2022b).

However, as stated on the Templestay website, ‘The specific contents of the programs may vary with the temples’. In other words, the activities mentioned above are not uniformly practiced at every temple (Templestay 2022a). After a more detailed inquiry, it was found that other activities are also available, including temple food making, pilgrimage meditation, *seonmudo* (Buddhist martial arts, 禪武道, 선무도), yoga meditation, *gukgung* (archery, 국궁), and tea meditation coaching (Templestay 2022c). Due to the uniqueness of some of these activities and the need for English interpreters in temples that accommodate foreign guests, there is a limit to the availability of the programs mentioned on the website. While a variety of options meets various needs, there is a lack of consistency throughout the overall framework of the program. While there are several studies on participation satisfaction and the effectiveness of Templestay, this effectiveness can be hard to verify given any program inconsistency across Templestay temples.

#### 4. Motivation and Satisfaction of Participants

Next, consideration is given to what motivated visitors to participate in Templestay. In recent years, research has been conducted where a distinction has been drawn between domestic (Korean) and international participants. In the case of Koreans, the new emphasis on increased leisure time (since the implementation of the five-day workweek in 2004) and increasing attentiveness regarding stress management due to economic hardships and unemployment has been linked to tourism for stress relief (Yang and Lee 2019, p. 26). According to one study, the main motivations for participating in a Templestay program among Koreans include relaxation through the disengagement of daily life, self-growth, reflection, interaction with nature, and emotional stability and stress relief through meditation (Oh and Choi 2021, p. 160). This is in line with a survey of 18,400 Koreans from 2019 to 2020 on what they associate with Templestay. In this survey, 75% of individuals primarily associated Templestay with relaxation/healing, the most common response (Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism 2022, p. 26).

In the case of foreign visitors, the motivation for participating in a Templestay program was interest in traditional Korean culture at 31%, interest in Buddhist culture at 29%, interest in self-reflection at 19%, and rest/recharge at 11% (Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism 2022, p. 24). These results differ from the main motivations of Koreans as foreigners are generally more interested in learning about cultural elements. This survey supports a previous study which included the survey of 823 Koreans and foreigners, where foreigners were more likely to be motivated by their interest in traditional Korean culture and Buddhist culture, while Koreans were more likely to participate in Templestay for spiritual reasons including self-reflection (Shim and Kim 2011, pp. 354–55). Therefore, in order to improve the overall satisfaction of Templestay participants, simply applying a standard program across all Templestay locations would be shortsighted. It is necessary to identify and distinguish the motivations of the participants which might, at least in part, be conducted by considering whether participants are international tourists.

While the motivation to enroll in a Templestay program tends to be either to learn about a new culture or to unwind from the stresses of daily life, the level of satisfaction during the program is an important factor in determining the rate of return visits. For a detailed look at the rates of satisfaction among Korean and foreign participants, a study examined the motivations and satisfaction of 1040 individuals (72.8%—762 Koreans and 27.2%—278 foreigners) ten years after participating in Templestay. The demographics of the participants were 66.5% female (518) and 31.3% male (244), with 33% (257) in their teens and twenties, 45% (352) in their thirties and forties, and 22% (168) in their fifties and sixties. Approximately 38% (303) of visitors did not associate with a religious affiliation, 38% (296) were Buddhist, 9.5% (75) were Protestant, and 8.7% (68) were Catholic. Among the foreigners, 53.9% were male (157) and 41.6% female (121), with 44.6% (130) in their teens and twenties, 38.1% (111) in their thirties and forties, and

17.3% (50) in their fifties and sixties. Their religious affiliations were Protestant at 30.9% (90), Catholic at 33.3% (97), those with no religious affiliation at 28.5% (83), and Buddhist at 3.4% (10) (Chun and Kim 2012, p. 34).

This study (Chun and Kim 2012) categorized the satisfaction factors of Templestay experiences into four categories, including interaction with nature, self-growth (introspection, reflection, and retrospection), education (acquiring new knowledge), and relaxation (taking a break from one's daily routine), and then analyzed the degree to which Korean and foreign participants were satisfied with their Templestay experience. The results showed that relaxation, interaction with nature, and self-growth significantly influenced the satisfaction of domestic participants ( $F = 209.68$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), while the factors of education, interaction with nature, and relaxation significantly influenced the satisfaction of foreign participants ( $F = 63.58$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) (Chun and Kim 2012, pp. 33–36). Therefore, for both Koreans and foreigners, interacting with nature and taking a break from everyday life were common satisfaction factors. However, education for Koreans and self-growth for foreigners seem to be less important when gauging their level of satisfaction with the program.

Furthermore, increasing one's sense of satisfaction does not only come with participation in the activities that one prefers but also with participation in activities that have a positive effect. For some, Templestay is a form of leisure activity, the short-term effects of which include stress reduction, positive emotions, and relaxation (Park 2017a, p. 416). In addition, Templestay programs include meditation practice, which includes elements of mindfulness. The effects of meditation also include stress reduction and emotional stability. As a means of fostering psychological well-being, Templestay has two prominent components, tourism conducted at one's leisure and meditation to reduce stress. One study shows the positive effect of short-term Templestay on stress reduction. This study mentions that Korea has the highest suicide rate among OECD countries and that stress and depression are the main reasons behind this. It further examined the impact of Templestay on stress reduction among 50 participants (27 women and 23 men). Participants experienced a two-day, one-night program that included 108 prostrations, meditation, and chanting. The participants completed four surveys in total; the first survey was completed immediately prior to the Templestay program, the second was completed a week later, the third was done a month later, and the fourth and final survey was done three months after their stay. The results showed a significant decrease in stress after the Templestay experience, with no significant difference between men and women. Furthermore, the highest stress levels were recorded in the first survey before the program started and the lowest in the second survey, followed by the third and fourth surveys (Su and Baek 2015, pp. 29–35). According to this study, it appears that Templestay programs are an effective means of short-term stress reduction with symptoms beginning to return within the first month after the completion of the program.

In addition to stress reduction, healing from negative emotions, improved quality of life, and increased self-reflection are also cited as effects of Templestay. As mentioned above, there is a growing interest in traditional healing exercises in Korea, such as meditation and yoga. Studies have shown that people who participated in a Templestay program report feeling more relaxed and noted it was helpful for their mental well-being (Kim and You 2015, pp. 277–90). Another study has shown that psychological well-being and self-efficacy increased, and stress and depression decreased as a result of the program (Im 2022, pp. 390–405). Based on these and the above-mentioned studies, the effects of Templestay programs can be summarized as having beneficial effects regarding participants' subjective reports on the reduction of negative emotions such as stress and depression, and a sense of healing from increased leisure time and meditation.

However, despite the benefits and rates of satisfaction among temple visitors, the number of people participating in Templestay has been declining in recent years. Over the past 20 years that Templestay has been available, it is possible that the needs and desires of potential participants have changed. It has also been argued that the emphasis on quan-

tative growth has led to the over-commercialization of religion (Park 2017b, p. 54). Thus, the next section considers the limitations of Templestay, as well as its future directions.

## 5. Limitations and Future Directions of Templestay

As mentioned above, the annual growth rate of Templestay participants averaged 25% between 2005 and 2010, but then began to decline. In 2019, just before the pandemic began, the number of participants was 294,796, but in 2020, due to social distancing and isolation, the number of participants reached 115,957, a growth rate of −60% (Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism 2022, p. 20). Since the pandemic, the number of participants has shown no sign of recovery. Although the COVID-19 pandemic had an understandably very negative effect, participation numbers were already in decline prior to the outbreak of the virus. Despite the downward trend, funding and promotional support have been continuously increasing. Thus, this research considers the degree to which Templestay reflects social changes and the current needs of potential participants.

A study examining the preferences of Templestay participants analyzed keywords using big data. In the study, 6685 words relating to the keyword Templestay were collected and analyzed through Naver and Daum, Korea's largest portal sites. Using the NetDraw function of the UCINET program the trends at the time (2014) were analyzed. As a result of analyzing the top 30 keywords, which accounted for more than 1% of the overall search, the following words and phrases were found to be most common: 'traditional temple culture' garnered 12.39% (321 words), 'one-day stay' at 10.58% (274 words), 'experience-based program' at 7.64% (198 words), and 'Korean Buddhism' at 5.02% (130 words) (Kim and Kim 2015, pp. 31–33).

Another study analyzing keywords just five years later (2019) used 56,702 words extracted from Naver and Daum and found that meditation and experience were the two most frequently used terms, appearing 997 and 853 times, respectively (Yang 2021, pp. 254–56). Based on these findings, Templestay seems to have been initially stimulated by participant curiosity about the program itself, including interest in Korean Buddhism, traditional temples, day trips, etc. However, in recent years, now that Templestay has become well established, the focus of public attention seems to have shifted to the features of Templestay, namely, meditation and experienced-based learning. At any rate, what this research shows is that peoples' interests surrounding Templestay are undoubtedly changing.

Affiliation with religious institutions has been declining over the past few decades, especially in more affluent and economically stable countries. In a 2022 report citing statistics collected by the Pew Research Center (PRC), National Public Radio (NPR) stated that "America's Christian majority is on track to end" (National Public Radio 2022). According to PRC, Christians could represent less than 50% of religions in America by as early as 2070 (Pew Research Center 2022). Moreover, not only are Americans losing faith in Christianity but in religious institutions in general. Gallup Polls found that confidence in organized religion is down. In 2019, of those surveyed, 36% said they had 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in organized religion, down from 68% in 1975 (Gallup 2022). Similar results can be found in other OECD countries, and Korea is no exception. In Korea, the proportion of religiously affiliated individuals was 54% of the total population in 2004, however, it decreased to 50% of those surveyed in 2014 and 40% in 2021 (Gallup Korea 2021). Despite decreases in religious affiliation, the demand for meditation and yoga is increasing. Compared to some meditation apps such as Headspace, Simple Habit, and Kam, the Korean meditation app market is still in its infancy. However, Mabo, the leading meditation app in Korea, has been steadily growing. Not only has Mabo's annual revenue grown by more than 150%, but so too have the number of app downloads and app subscribers (Choi 2020).

The reasons for the newfound interest in meditation are varied, but a likely candidate is an increase in depression and anxiety. According to data from the Health Insurance Review & Assessment Service, the number of patients who have been treated for mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety has been on the rise since 2013 (HIRA (Health Insurance Review and Assessment Service) 2018). The number of those suffering from de-



pression and anxiety disorders are also increasing. In the case of depression, the number of cases is up from 680,169 in 2017 to 910,785 in 2021. In the case of anxiety disorders, cases are up from 633,862 in 2017 to 819,080 in 2021 (Jung 2022). Furthermore, upon analyzing keyword trends in connection with the word Templestay, a 2020 study found that coronavirus, therapy, and programs were three of the most commonly searched keywords (Yang 2021, p. 269), indicating an interest in therapeutic programs in the context of Templestay. To the extent that a therapeutic environment during Templestay programs is a priority of potential participants, it is necessary to provide experience-based programs tailored to their needs. This could be achieved by hiring more program leaders qualified to facilitate therapeutic activities such as meditation.

In addition to increasing the emphasis on meditation, program consistency is also important. While the Templestay website lists the common activities discussed above (temple tour, meditation, tea ceremony, monastic meal, and Buddhist services/rituals) there are many others offered less frequently, but which may be unfamiliar, even to Koreans (temple food-making, pilgrimage meditation, Buddhist martial arts, yoga meditation, archery, tea meditation coaching, etc.). When booking online and browsing the numerous programs displayed on the Templestay website, it is conceivable that one's expectations for a particular program will go unmet if one happens to attend a temple/region that does not offer the activity in question. The Templestay program must be implemented under a consistent and common framework to ensure meeting the expectations of and therefore satisfying the practitioner's needs and desires.

Moreover, Templestay programs could benefit from more thoughtful consideration when differentiating the needs of locals as opposed to foreigners. As mentioned above, the motivations of locals and foreigners for participating in a Templestay are different. While healing, self-reflection, and relaxation were the main motivations for locals, foreigners were most interested in traditional Korean and Buddhist culture (Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism 2022, p. 24). Therefore, when accommodating foreign visitors, not only is the language barrier a significant issue, considerations regarding what programs/activities to offer ought to be taken. Where locals tend to appreciate programs supplemented with meditation for stress relief and healing, including 108 prostrations, foreigners are likely to appreciate more information about the culture and explanations that may, for many Koreans, seem commonplace and even uninteresting. While this information is relatively limited to the few studies that have been conducted, regular surveys including feedback, both positive and negative, would be invaluable to the further development of the program.

Although this article has primarily been concerned with declining participation rates and how to remedy this problem, another factor important to this investigation has to do with the relationship between culture and tourism and the worry that sacred traditions could be used as commodities. Some have expressed concerns that Templestay could be tarnished if it becomes commodified or used primarily as a means to promote tourism (Kim and Kim 2015, pp. 37–38). Being overly focused on quantitative growth (including increasing the number of participants as well as economic growth) has the potential to undermine the authenticity of the tradition. The social and economic framework within which Templestay functions is a given, and as such, there are consumer-centric paths ingrained in the fabric of modern capital-emphasized society that must inevitably be navigated. While it is necessary to maintain and increase the number of participants for the survival of the program, the degree to which such programs should be used promotionally is unclear. On the one hand, promotions could be used to further a cultural or economic agenda while, on the other hand, they could be used to reach out and help the suffering by teaching meditation and creating a sacred space for the community. Commercialization is necessary to raise awareness; however, over-commercialization threatens to cheapen the sacredness of a tradition thousands of years old. Moreover, many of the individuals interested in unplugging from the world and searching for their True-self in a mountain temple are doing so as a respite from their work-a-day lives. In this sense, catering to prospective participants through promotions, commercials, and even customizing activities to their needs/desires may be contrary to the intended effect.

Those who seek a break from a world laden with commercialization will be attracted to a Templestay program that has not been compromised by commercialization.

A motto associated with the Templestay program is, ‘finding your True self’ (Templestay 2022a). Here, True-self is indicative of the illusory or temporal self, transcended (*jina*, 眞我, 진아). It may also indicate one’s True nature or *jinseong* (眞性, 진성). The pursuit of the transcendent and ultimate meaning of life beyond the secular is one of the central values of Seon Buddhism and thus Templestay. Tired of the coldness of materialism, many people now long for a return to humanity and the pursuit of spiritual values (Park 2017b, p. 53), and this pursuit has been reflected in Templestay. It has resulted from a complex interplay of modern attitudes toward religion and tourism, as well as politics. A balance must be found between religion, which is based on an ethical framework and aims for transcendence, and tourism, which generates much-needed revenue.

There have been some sharp critics of Templestay. In the past, many Westerners were attracted to Korean Seon Buddhism and even became Korean monks, in large part due to the teachings of the Korean Seon master Seungsahn (승산) who preached abroad. Several monks have pointed out that the creation of the Templestay program was a mistake for Korean Buddhism (Bae 2013) because it began as a tourist attraction in the wake of the 2002 World Cup, an event that transformed Korean Buddhism from a religion of enlightenment to a mere tourist product. It has further been argued that the establishment of Templestay was the beginning of the government’s financial involvement in the traditional operations of temples, and that money and politics have continued to influence Templestay ever since. As such, Templestay has been both a source of pride and a problem for Korean Buddhism (Bae 2013).

## 6. Conclusions

Templestay is a program that involves staying in a Korean temple and exploring the historical architecture, statues, and natural scenery there within. It also is a chance for visitors to experience such activities as meditation and various religious services/rituals. Since its introduction in 2002, Templestay has played an important role as a medium to convey Korean traditional culture and Buddhist values to people domestically and abroad. It has also provided stress reduction and the cultivation of well-being for many. However, the number of participants has been declining after the rapid growth between 2002 and 2012. The recent pandemic has also had a negative effect; however, numbers have been declining since before COVID-19. It has been speculated that the decline in participants is due to social changes including an increase in those who do not affiliate themselves with an organized religion. Although there continues to be an increase in interest in exercises like meditation that promote psychological well-being, these are often practiced in secular contexts. Furthermore, the main motivations for Korean Templestay participants and foreign Templestay participants have been shown to be different. Although program uniformity across all temples is desirable, the Templestay program could also benefit from a specially designed program to accommodate the needs of foreign visitors who tend to want more culturally rich content. In this case, an increase in personnel to manage translation issues would be necessary. Moreover, the official website clearly lists the details of the Templestay program, but there are additional activities that vary by region and temple. Thus, any lack of program consistency may result in less than satisfactory experiences, especially when considering research that clarifies the relationship between unmet expectations and dissatisfaction. Furthermore, given the increasing number of people suffering from depression and anxiety disorders and the growing interest in meditation for therapeutic purposes, it would be beneficial to adjust programs to have more time allotted to meditation and meditation-related content like mindfulness practice.

Worries about over-commercialization and the commodification of Buddhist culture were also investigated. Over-commercialization has the potential to encroach on the territory of religion. For example, as a marketing strategy for Templestay, some researchers have suggested strategies for upscaling the program by creating a high-end temple accom-

modation program where guests can pay KRW 1.5–2.5 million (about USD 1000–2000) per night (Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism 2022, p. 40). However, if Templestay is to function as a retreat for people who are tired of a materialistic society driven by the pursuit of wealth and success, then it would be beneficial to provide an environment with fewer distractions, allowing for optimum reflection within the realm of the religious/spiritual.

This article has been an investigation of the achievements and shortcomings of Templestay. It has been the authors' aim to investigate the limitations of the program as a means to better understand its future and encourage its growth. Our hope is that Korean Buddhism and Templestay will continue to serve as an important medium to educate Koreans and foreigners about the uniqueness of Korean culture and traditional Buddhism while maintaining religious and spiritual elements. Moreover, this article suggests future directions for this program as a way to ensure that the healing, stress-reducing, and psychologically calming effects of Templestay continue to have a positive impact.

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