

Satisfied or dissatisfied: The determinants of Global Korea Scholarship recipients' satisfaction with life in Korea

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Abstract

Sponsored international student mobility programs are important public diplomacy tools for governments. These programs' positive outcomes are usually taken for granted and are rarely assessed. International students' satisfaction with life in the host country is an important variable for their behavioral outcomes related to the host country. This study used data from two surveys of Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) recipients from 136 countries to examine the determinants of their satisfaction with life in Korea. We found that students' cognitive and affective evaluations of Korea, frequency of Korean-language social interactions, and perceptions of their treatment by Koreans because of their nationality or religion were significant determinants of GKS students' satisfaction with life in Korea. In terms of demographic characteristics, men, students from developing countries, and those majoring in natural sciences or engineering fields were more satisfied than their peers. We discuss the implications of these findings for public diplomacy.

KEYWORDS

Asia, Global Korea Scholarship, international student mobility, *P&P* Special Issue, public diplomacy, satisfaction, South Korea

Related Articles in this Special Issue

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In the twenty-first century, most countries offer scholarship programs for international students. A major reason for spending government resources on international students is the potential of "manufacturing sympathy" (Wilson, 2014). In other words, governments offer international scholarship programs as part of their public diplomacy toolbox to facilitate a better understanding of the host country, more positive sentiments toward it, and deeper ties between the societies in students' homes and host countries (Ayhan et al., 2021b; Scott-Smith, 2008). However, in most cases, the assumption that these goals are achieved remains relatively untested (Banks, 2011; Mawer, 2014; Sommerfeldt & Buhmann, 2019).

Some studies have addressed this issue, aiming to evaluate international scholarship programs' public diplomacy-related outcomes, such as facilitating the diffusion of values and practices (Atkinson, 2010), building affinity with the host country as measured by increasing voting similarity at the United Nations (Martinez Machain, 2021), shaping positive public opinion (Wilson, 2014), encouraging relationship building and maintenance between the host society and scholarship recipients (Varpahovskis & Ayhan, 2020), and generating positive word-of-mouth about the host country (Ayhan & Gouda, 2021).

Scholarship-sponsoring governments and institutions may measure the output of their international student mobility programs on the basis of the number of students or the amount of money spent on these programs. However, an important outcome that matters for public diplomacy is the satisfaction of sponsored students in the host country, which has been suggested as an important predictor of students' behavioral outcomes related to the host country. A satisfied student will be more likely to have positive attitudes toward, share more positive word-of-mouth about the host country (Tam & Ayhan, 2021), and stay in the country after graduation to work as a skilled immigrant (Istad et al., 2021). It is important to note that international students, including those who receive government scholarships, may have negative experiences in the host country, such as dissatisfaction, feelings of loneliness, or discrimination (Hanassab, 2006; Hong et al., 2021; Jon, 2012; Lee & Rice, 2007; Yun & Vibber, 2012). Government-sponsored students generally benefit from financial and institutional support from their scholarship programs, but they may still experience difficulties and dissatisfaction in the host country. Clearly, we should not take the positive outcomes of the scholarship experience for granted. Therefore, the determinants of scholarship students' satisfaction are of interest in public diplomacy scholarship and to policy makers who design these programs.

Against this backdrop, we address the following research questions in the context of the Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) program offered by the government of the Republic of Korea (hereafter Korea) for degree-seeking international students: (1) What determines GKS students' level of satisfaction with life in Korea? (2) Is predisposition toward Korea significantly related to these student's satisfaction in Korea?

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND SPONSORED INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY PROGRAMS

Over the past few decades, governments worldwide have increasingly invested in public diplomacy "to understand cultures, attitudes, and behavior; build and manage relationships; and influence opinions and actions to advance their interests and values" (Gregory, 2008, p. 276).

International student mobility programs are among the core tools of public diplomacy (Cull, 2008). The main factor that makes an international student mobility program a public diplomacy tool is the sponsor's intention to use the program to achieve the abovementioned public diplomacy objectives (Ayhan, 2019). Public diplomacy scholars have tended to focus mainly on international student mobility in Western countries and to discuss these programs in a positive light, with the exception of anecdotal examples of extreme negative cases (cf. Cull, 2019, Chapter 6; Snow, 2009). In the public diplomacy literature, there is general agreement that these programs contribute to students' favorable attitudes toward and more complex understanding of the host country, as well as facilitating relationships with individuals in the host country (Mathews-Aydinli, 2016; Scott-Smith, 2008; Snow, 2009, 2020).

In addition, the literature on international student mobility has shown that participation in international mobility programs can benefit students in terms of cultural, personal, and employment/career outcomes (Roy et al., 2019). For example, students may gain increased respect for cultural differences, develop foreign language skills, become more confident and independent, and tend to choose international careers (Fry et al., 2009; Norris and Gillespie, 2009; Roy et al., 2019; Vande Berg et al., 2009).

However, the positive outcomes of these programs may be determined by a variety of factors during a student's stay in the host country and should not be taken for granted. The outcomes may vary across different demographic groups because of their differing experiences. Ayhan and others' (2021b) exploratory study on GKS recipients' uncovered significant differences in the perceived country image of Korea across different demographic groups. They found that recipients who were women, those from developed countries, those who have been in Korea for more than two years, and those who remained in Korea after graduation evaluated the country more positively, compared with other recipients. In this study, we respond to these researchers' call for a more focused study on the determinants of GKS recipients' satisfaction, which could provide more specific findings to inform policy makers and other researchers about the public diplomacy aspects of international student mobility programs.

As mentioned above, it is also possible for students to have negative experiences while living abroad in different cultures. For instance, Yan and Berliner (2013) described the struggles of Chinese students in the United States with culture shock, social isolation, financial difficulties, and concerns about visa issues. International students may also feel personal, social, and cultural loneliness in the host country (Sawir et al., 2008), and they experience prejudice and discrimination from domestic students and faculty on campus and from local people off campus (Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Hanassab, 2006; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Quinton, 2019). Lee and Rice (2007) drew attention to these issues, using neoracism theory to understand international students' experiences of discrimination and inhospitality in the United States because of their race, region of origin, and language. In Korea, Jon (2012) has shown power differentials between Korean and international students that vary with the international students' country of origin and the native languages they speak. The Korean students in Jon's study tended to prefer international students from Western countries and those who spoke English and were reluctant to interact with those from developing countries. Lee and others (2017) confirmed this tendency with quantitative data, reporting that students from other Asian countries tend to feel unwelcome and treated unfairly in Korea, compared with students from North America and Europe. Further, Zoljargal and Chimed (2014) have shown that international students in Korea experience exclusion and stereotypes that vary by country of origin and level of English proficiency. Jon (2019) explored experiences in Korea among Korea International Cooperation Agency scholarship recipients, who are government officials from developing countries whose graduate study is funded by the Korean government. The study's findings showed that these students had dual experiences in Korea, benefiting from special treatment by the Korean government and their university but also experiencing discrimination because of their country of origin and race. Jamaludin and others (2018) suggested the possibility that international



students' perceived discrimination in the host country may be related to their lower level of destination loyalty intention, although they did not demonstrate this in their study. Therefore, it is necessary to examine whether international students' negative experiences affect their satisfaction with life in the host country as an outcome of public diplomacy scholarship programs.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' SATISFACTION IN THE HOST COUNTRY

Although previous work has investigated factors related to international students in various countries, little research has focused on government scholarship-sponsored students' satisfaction. Here, we bring together literature from several different fields of study on international students' and other sojourners' satisfaction in a host country, constructing hypotheses on the basis of these studies' findings. Specifically, our independent variables are the length of stay in the host country, perception of treatment by people in the host country, interactions with different social groups in the host country, proficiency with the host country's language, and country image of the host country. Building on previous studies, we also control for gender, the level of development in the home country, field of study, degree level, and criteria for choosing the scholarship program.

Research on sojourners' acculturation and adaptation in a foreign country has found a U-shaped curve: the sojourners are initially content upon their arrival in the host country, but their satisfaction levels then shift to become relatively negative, before finally returning to the initial level after the sojourner adapts to or leaves the host country (Black & O'Bright, 2016; Gudykunst et al., 1977; Oberg, 1960). Studies on international students have also found support for this U-curve hypothesis (Yun, 2014), including among GKS recipients in Korea (Ayhan et al., 2021b). Notably, Alemu and Cordier (2017) found that international students remaining in Korea for longer periods of time show higher satisfaction levels.

Hypothesis 1 *GKS students who have arrived in Korea within the last year have higher levels of satisfaction with life in Korea, compared with students who have been in Korea for two to four years, and a similar level of satisfaction to that of students who have been in Korea for longer than four years.*

As discussed above, international students may experience social and academic difficulties as well as racism and discrimination in the host country (Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Hanassab, 2006; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Quinton, 2019; Sawir et al., 2008; Yan & Berliner, 2013). For example, negative treatment by their Australian hosts was found to create perceptions of discrimination, exclusion, imposed invisibility, and outsider status among sojourners (Tran, 2009), and Chinese students studying in New Zealand have been reported to regard their host culture as racist and intolerant (Benson, 2016). Importantly, such experiences of social difficulties and perceived discrimination have been found to be negatively associated with sojourners' satisfaction in the host country (Hong et al., 2021; Perrucci & Hu, 1995; Sam et al., 2015). Moreover, international students may experience unfair treatment and discrimination because of their country of origin, race, and native language. Lee and Rice (2007) reported on the experiences of alienation, discrimination, and outright racism among international students from Asia and the Middle East, and students from Asia and from other European countries have received negative treatment in the United Kingdom (Ledwith & Seymour, 2001). In Korea, Lee and others (2017) have shown that students from Asian countries report greater difficulties and unfair treatment, compared with students from Europe, North America, and other regions.

International students' perceptions of discrimination (Gesing & Glass, 2019; Jon, 2012; Sam, 2001; Tam & Ayhan, 2021; Yun & Vibber, 2012) and their lack of social interaction with

host country nationals (Istad et al., 2021; Pedersen et al., 2011) may lead to negative attitudes and/or behavior toward the host country.

Hypothesis 2 *There is a positive relationship between GKS students' perceptions of their treatment by Koreans because of their nationality, gender/sex, ethnicity, or religion and their satisfaction with life in Korea.*

Previous studies have shown that sojourners, including international students, tend to create “multicultural bubbles” with people from similar cultural backgrounds and/or other international sojourners (or international students) (Beech, 2019; Wilson, 2014), mainly because of the difficulty of building relationships with locals (Chen & Nakazawa, 2009; Ward, 2001), which leads to feelings of marginalization (Pedersen et al., 2011). Building friendships with host country nationals may help with international students' adjustment in the host country and improve their satisfaction with life there (Gareis et al., 2011; Perrucci & Hu, 1995; Sam, 2001; Tam & Ayhan, 2021; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). This finding has also been reported among international students in Korea (Alemu & Cordier, 2017).

Hypothesis 3 *There is a positive relationship between GKS students' level of Korean-language interaction and their satisfaction with life in Korea.*

Proficiency in the language of the host country is among the most important determinants of international students' satisfaction and adaptation in the host country (Dunnnett, 1977; Johnson, 1971; Lee et al., 1980; Perrucci & Hu, 1995; Sawir et al., 2012). Language also affects with whom international students have social interactions while living in the host country. Having difficulty socializing with locals because of the language barrier, international students may prefer to have more social interactions with people with whom they speak their native language or with other international students with whom they speak a common foreign language other than the host country language (Beech, 2019; Bilecen, 2014; Chen & Nakazawa, 2009; Wilson, 2014).

Hypothesis 4 *There is a positive relationship between GKS students' Korean language proficiency and their satisfaction with life in Korea.*

Many other studies on international student mobility programs, including a few in this special issue, have analyzed how international students' beliefs about and attitudes toward the host country affect their behaviors related to that country (Ayhan & Gouda, 2021; Aziz et al., 2016; Eder et al., 2010; Istad et al., 2021; Shafaei & Razak, 2016; Tam & Ayhan, 2021; Varpahovskis & Ayhan, 2020; Yun, 2014). Although these studies have demonstrated a relationship between country image—a complex attitudinal construct based on people's beliefs about and attitudes toward a country (Buhmann, 2016)—and students' behaviors related to the host country, they have not explored the relationship between satisfaction with life in the host country and country image.

Many attitude–behavior studies have suggested that satisfaction explains the variance in attitudinal constructs (Carlson & O'Casey, 2010; Lee et al., 2014; San Martín et al., 2013). However, other studies have indicated that the relationship could also be the other way around, with place image affecting satisfaction (San Martín et al., 2018; Szymanski & Henard, 2001; Westbrook & Oliver, 1991). Taken together, the findings of these two groups of studies suggest the possibility of two-way causality.¹

¹Because our dependent variable in this study is satisfaction, we only looked at a one-way relationship, but the possibility of two-way causality and remedies to address potential endogeneity should be addressed in future studies.



- Hypothesis 5a** *There is a positive relationship between GKS students' beliefs about Korea's competencies and competitiveness (their cognitive evaluation of the country on the functional dimension) and their satisfaction with life in Korea.*
- Hypothesis 5b** *There is a positive relationship between GKS students' beliefs about the norms and values associated with Korea (their cognitive evaluation of the country on the normative dimension) and their satisfaction with life in Korea.*
- Hypothesis 5c** *There is a positive relationship between GKS students' beliefs about Korea's culture and nature (their cognitive evaluation of the country on the aesthetic dimension) and their satisfaction with life in Korea.*
- Hypothesis 6** *There is a positive relationship between GKS students' feelings of affection for, and fascination with, Korea (their affective evaluation of the country on the emotional dimension) and their satisfaction with life in Korea.*

Country image studies have found differences between men's and women's attitudes toward the country of origin of products (de Tavares Canto Guina & de Moura Engracia Giraldi, 2015; Juric & Worsley, 1998; Wall et al., 1988). Ayhan and others' (2021b) study points toward the gendered dynamics of international student mobility, finding that female GKS recipients' attitudes toward Korea become significantly more negative after their arrival in the country, compared with those of their male counterparts (see Sun et al., 2009 for similar findings in China). Expanding these findings, Lee and Snow (2021) found female students to report more perceived negative treatment because of their gender compared with men, which, in turn, affects their attitudes toward Korea.

Previous studies on immigrants and international students have shown that their experiences in, and attitudes toward, the host country are not universal; rather, they are significantly affected by the characteristics of the country of origin, including its level of development. These studies have pointed to a dependency model of international student mobility flows, where students from developing countries have higher chances of upward mobility after studying in developed countries, which creates a mostly one-way flow of international students from developing countries to developed countries (Barnett et al., 2016; Barnett & Wu, 1995; Caruso & de Wit, 2014; Gesing & Glass, 2019; Jon et al., 2014; Levatino, 2017). Ayhan and others (2021b) have found students from developing countries to be more positive in their attitudes toward Korea compared with students from developed countries. In addition, Lee (2015) showed that, among GKS students from Africa, understanding of Korea's economic development and global position, information communication technology knowledge acquired in Korea, and evaluation of the quality of education in Korea were significantly related to satisfaction.

In most cultural exchange or student mobility programs, excluding certain public servant or military exchange programs (Martinez Machain, 2021), participants often self-select to apply for international scholarships, which suggests that scholarship recipients have a positive predisposition toward the host country (Banks, 2011). Correspondingly, a British Council report found trust of the British people among 75% of people who had participated in the British Council's cultural activities and 64% of people who had participated in non-British Council cultural activities but only 49% of people who had not participated in any cultural activities related to the United Kingdom (Thomas, 2019). Although the British Council interpreted these findings as an indication of "trust as a soft power outcome" (Thomas, 2019, p. 8), individuals who participate in the British Council's activities are highly likely to have relatively positive attitudes toward the British people. Nevertheless, self-selection bias and the related issue of predisposition are seldom addressed in evaluations of public diplomacy or related programs. In this study, to control for self-selection bias, we include liking Korea as a criterion for choosing the GKS.

METHODOLOGY

Data

Korea initiated the Korean Government Scholarship Program (KGSP; later renamed the GKS) in 1967, offering scholarships for international students to complete degree programs in Korea. The program was expanded after 2005 mainly to boost the internationalization of higher education in the country and to introduce the scholarship program as part of Korea's public diplomacy portfolio. Currently, each year, over 1100 students from around 150 countries receive the GKS to complete undergraduate or graduate degree programs in Korea. Most of these students are from developing countries, especially in East Asia, as the Korean government treats the GKS as part of the country's official development assistance. As of March 2018, the largest numbers of scholarship recipients came from Indonesia (3.3%), Vietnam (3.1%), Mongolia (2.7%), China (2.7%), and Uzbekistan (2.3%) (National Institute for International Education [NIIED], 2018). GKS applicants do not need to have prior knowledge of the Korean language, but scholarship recipients must have some proficiency in Korean before beginning their degree programs. Students must either complete a year of Korean language instruction as part of their scholarship scheme and score at Level 4 or above on the Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK), or achieve a TOPIK score of Level 5 or higher without completing a year of language instruction. Students pursuing an undergraduate degree receive a monthly stipend of 900,000 Korean won (nearly USD 800), and those pursuing a graduate degree receive 1,000,000 Korean won (nearly USD 900) monthly.²

This study used data on GKS students collected by Ayhan and others (2021a). Specifically, we used two surveys from the original dataset. The first survey was conducted among GKS students in June 2018 via SurveyMonkey with the help of the NIIED, which is in charge of the GKS program. There were 1107 complete responses. Female students accounted for 61% of the respondents, and male students accounted for 39%. In terms of the home country, 4.7% of the students were from Indonesia, 3% were from Vietnam, 2.6% were from Russia, 2.6% were from Brazil, and 2.5% were from Bangladesh, with other countries accounting for less than 2.3% each. In terms of the level of degree pursued, 25% of the respondents were enrolled in a Korean language school and had not yet begun their degree programs, 19% were pursuing a Bachelor's degree, 43% were pursuing a Master's degree, and 13% were pursuing a Doctoral degree. As for the field of study, 47.1% were studying humanities or social sciences, 43.7% were studying natural sciences or engineering, and 9.23% were studying other fields. A total of 6.2% of the respondents had begun receiving the GKS in 2018, 30.7% in 2017, 31.2% in 2016, 23.1% in 2015, and 8.4% in 2014 or earlier. From this dataset, we used GKS students' level of satisfaction with life in Korea measured using a single item ("All things considered, I am satisfied with my life in South Korea"), with responses a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly dissatisfied to strongly satisfied. We also used responses to open-ended questions on the respondents' main reasons for their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with life in Korea. The respondents were asked to write down the top three reasons for both their satisfaction and their dissatisfaction.

The second survey was conducted in December 2019. This survey was sent to all GKS students who were enrolled in Korean higher education institutions and receiving the scholarship at the time of the survey, again via SurveyMonkey, with the help of the NIIED. In total, 747 students completed and submitted the survey, and we used a sample of 736 students for the analysis, excluding those who did not indicate their country of origin. Female students accounted for 62.2% of the respondents, and male students accounted for 37.8%. In terms of region of origin, 47.8% were from Asia, 23.1% were from Africa, 12.8% were from Europe, 13%

²For more information on the GKS, see National Institute for International Education. 2021. *About Global Korea Scholarship*. Accessed on January 13, 2021. Available online at https://www.studyinkorea.go.kr/en/sub/gks/allnew_invite.do



were from Latin America and the Caribbean, 2.7% were from North America, and .5% were from Oceania. As for the country of origin, the largest number of respondents from a single country came from Vietnam (5%), followed by 3.1% from Ethiopia, 3.0% from Indonesia, and 2.9% from the Philippines. The vast majority of the respondents were from developing countries (91%), with only 9.0% coming from developed countries. In terms of the degree level they pursued in Korea, 22.7% received the GKS to pursue a Bachelor's degree, 58.2% to pursue a Master's degree, and 19.2% to pursue a Doctoral degree. For the field of study, 52.3% were studying humanities or social sciences, 40.9% were studying natural sciences or engineering, and 6.8% were studying other fields. A total of 34.5% became GKS recipients in 2018, 33% in 2017, 19.8% in 2016, and 12.6% in 2015 or earlier.

This survey asked respondents their level of satisfaction with specific aspects of their lives in Korea: public safety, infrastructure in Korea (e.g., transport, Internet availability, shops), social interaction with fellow students, social interaction with Korean people, quality of education at their language school, quality of education at their university, financial support received as a GKS recipient, cultural experiences (e.g., concerts, museums, tourism), natural environment/ecology, and the availability of food meeting their dietary restrictions.

Variables and analysis

First, we analyzed descriptive statistics for the responses to open-ended questions from the 2018 survey on the respondents' main reasons for satisfaction and dissatisfaction with life in Korea. The responses to these open-ended questions were coded by two trained coders, and the intercoder reliability was 88% for satisfaction responses and 80% for dissatisfaction responses. We also created word clouds using the top reasons for satisfaction and dissatisfaction through the WordClouds.com website. The word clouds were created using the frequencies of words in each set of responses. The size of each word in the word clouds represents its frequency in the data.

Second, we analyzed descriptive statistics for each item on general satisfaction in Korea from the 2019 survey. There were *ten* such items, with each question asking about satisfaction with one of the following areas, with responses on a 10-point scale (1 = very unsatisfied, 10 = very satisfied): public safety, infrastructure in Korea, social interaction with fellow students, social interaction with Korean people, quality of education at their language school, quality of education at their university, financial support received as a GKS recipient, cultural experiences, natural environment/ecology, and availability of food meeting their dietary restrictions.

Third, we conducted a multiple regression analysis using the 2019 survey data to identify the factors that determine GKS students' level of satisfaction in Korea. We created a dependent variable by averaging the *ten* items on specific types of satisfaction to produce a general satisfaction variable ($M = 7.93$, $SD = 1.21$; $N = 735$). One respondent marked all items included in the general satisfaction variable as not applicable and was, therefore, excluded from the analysis. This dependent variable was not normally distributed, and general satisfaction scores were, therefore, transformed by cubing.

The independent variables consisted of demographic information, criteria for choosing a scholarship program, perceptions of treatment by Koreans, country image, social interactions, and Korean language proficiency. Gender was included among the demographic variables, with women coded as 1 and men coded as 0. United Nations (2020) country classifications were used to code the level of economic development in the students' home country as developed (=0) or developing (=1). The field of study was categorized into three groups: 1 = humanities or social sciences, 2 = natural sciences or engineering, and 3 = other. The level of degree to obtain through GKS was categorized into three groups: Bachelor's degree as 0, Master's degree as 1, and PhD degree as 2. The duration of stay in Korea was measured by asking when they began

living in Korea (1 = 2019, 2 = 2018, 3 = 2017, 4 = 2016, 5 = 2015 or earlier). In terms of their criteria for choosing a scholarship program, the respondents were asked to rank the degree of importance of each of the following categories using an 8-point scale (1 = most important, 8 = least important): the financial conditions of the scholarship, the quality of education at the host university, and liking the destination country. Perceptions of treatment by Koreans were measured by asking respondents about their treatment by Koreans because of their nationality, gender/sex, ethnic identity, and religious identity, with response options on a 5-point scale (1 = negatively, 2 = somewhat negatively, 3 = neither positively nor negatively, 4 = somewhat positively, 5 = positively). The country image was measured using 37 items assessing the functional, normative, aesthetic, and emotional dimensions (see Appendix 1 for more information) of country image, following Buhmann (2016). The emotional dimension measured the respondents' affection for Korea; the functional dimension measured the respondents' beliefs regarding Korea's political and economic competencies and competitiveness; the normative dimension measured the respondents' beliefs regarding Korea's integrity, norms, and values; and the aesthetic dimension measured the respondents' beliefs regarding Korea's culture and natural attractiveness (Buhmann, 2016, p. 44). We produced a separate score measuring each dimension of the country image by averaging the items within that dimension. To assess social interactions, three variables measured the GKS recipients' frequency of spending time with different groups: those with whom they spoke their native language, those with whom they spoke Korean, and those with whom they spoke another common language. A 5-point scale was used to respond to these items (1 = never, 2 = very rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = very often, 5 = always). English language ability level was measured on a 5-point scale (1 = basic, 2 = beginner, 3 = intermediate, 4 = advanced, 5 = fluent). Korean language ability was measured on a 6-point scale (1 = no Korean language experience, 2 = basic, 3 = beginner, 4 = intermediate, 5 = advanced, 6 = fluent). Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the independent variables.

FINDINGS

GKS students' satisfaction and dissatisfaction in Korea: Open-ended questions

The 2018 survey asked students three questions regarding satisfaction with life in Korea. In response to the first question, which asked about their level of satisfaction with life in Korea, 23% of the GKS students indicated that they were strongly satisfied, 44% indicated that they were satisfied, 1% said that they were strongly dissatisfied, and another 1% said that they were dissatisfied. The weighted mean score for satisfaction with life in Korea was 5.7 out of 7.

The second and third questions asked students about their top reasons for satisfaction and dissatisfaction with life in Korea, respectively. The GKS students had mixed experiences of feeling satisfied and dissatisfied with life in Korea while studying and living in the country. One of the major reasons for their satisfaction was the convenience of living in Korea (see Table 2). GKS students evaluated transportation, Internet, technology, and other infrastructure as well provided, easily available, and advanced in Korea, which made life comfortable. The high level of safety and security in Korean society was another reason for satisfaction.

Positive experiences with Korean people and making friends with Koreans and other international people were another aspect of GKS students' satisfaction with life in Korea. For example, respondents explained their reasons for satisfaction as follows: "humble, diligent, and supportive people of Korea;" "Korean people: contrary to the stereotype that I had been exposed to, Koreans are very nice and helpful;" and "friendships with local Koreans and other KGSP students." In addition, the quality of education, including teaching and learning,

**TABLE 1** Descriptive statistics of the independent variables included in the model

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation
Criteria for choosing a scholarship program		
Financial conditions of the scholarship	2.45	1.45
Quality of education at the host university	2.40	1.47
Liking the destination country	3.49	1.79
Country image		
Functional	5.50	.87
Normative	4.74	1.34
Aesthetic	5.95	.85
Emotional	5.80	.98
Frequency of interactions		
With people who speak their native language	3.16	1.13
With people who speak Korean	3.54	1.00
With people who speak another language	4.01	1.02
Korean language ability	4.47	.68
	<i>N</i>	%
Home country's level of economic development		
Developing	670	91
Developed	66	9.0
Gender		
Women	458	62.2
Men	278	37.8
Academic major		
Humanities or social sciences	385	52.3
Natural sciences or engineering	301	40.9
Other	50	6.80
Degree level		
Bachelor's	167	22.7
Master's	428	58.2
PhD	141	19.2
Start of stay in Korea		
2019	202	27.5
2018	213	28.9
2017	158	21.5
2016	81	11.9
2015 or earlier	82	11.1

Note: *N* = 736.

relationships with professors, and facilities, was an important reason for satisfaction with life in Korea.

The findings on reasons for GKS students' satisfaction with life in Korea are illustrated in the word cloud in Figure 1.

In terms of GKS recipients' main reasons for dissatisfaction with life in Korea, the most salient reason was the financial conditions of the GKS scholarship (see Table 3).

TABLE 2 GKS recipients' main reasons for satisfaction with life in Korea

	Frequency	Percentage
Life is convenient (e.g., because of transportation, technology, quality of life)	298	27
Positive experiences of social interactions (with Koreans and with the international community)	199	18
Quality of education (e.g., relationships with professors, language learning)	194	17.6
Safety	153	13.9
Culture and activities	68	6.2
Nature/environment	40	3.6
Financial support	37	3.4
Food	33	3
Other	81	7.3

Note: N = 1103.



FIGURE 1 Word cloud depicting GKS recipients' reasons for satisfaction with life in Korea

The GKS recipients felt that the amount of financial support provided by the scholarship was insufficient for living in Korea, particularly in the Seoul metropolitan area. Their lack of social interactions with Koreans and experiences of discrimination by Koreans also made them feel dissatisfied with life in Korea, as the following extracts illustrate:

I felt like there's a lack of bonding between the KGSP students and Koreans. It's a pity personally as we've come so far abroad but only have fellow KGSP students as our friends. I'm speaking only from the language year experience.

It is quite hard to get on with the Korean students even though I am capable of talking in Korean.

TABLE 3 GKS recipients' main reasons for dissatisfaction with life in Korea

	Frequency	Percentage
Finances/scholarship conditions	221	20.1
Lack of social interactions with Koreans	136	12.4
Language difficulty and language barrier	126	11.5
Discrimination in Korean society	105	9.6
Food	86	7.8
Administration at the university/language institute and facilities (e.g., dormitory)	76	6.9
Quality of educational experiences	61	5.6
Stress and loneliness	58	5.3
Cultural differences/barriers	54	4.9
Climate (including air quality)	47	4.3
Other	129	11.7

Note: $N = 1099$.

Koreans are still not open-minded enough to deal with foreigners and respect differences.

Some students shared that, on a daily basis, they experienced racism or discrimination because of their nationality, race, gender, or religion. They often felt that Korean people were reluctant to approach them or interact with them because of their appearance or country of origin. One GKS student described Koreans as having a “reluctant and somehow negative attitude toward the students from developing countries.” Others explained this reason for dissatisfaction as follows:

Some people are so rude that when they know we're foreigners, they already judge us.

The feeling I got when a (very small) part of South Korean society thinks that they are better than other groups of society/races.

South Korean people do discrimination on the basis of race, color, etc.

The language barrier because of difficulty with the Korean language was also important in explaining GKS students' feelings of dissatisfaction with life in Korea. They experienced difficulties in learning Korean, communicating in either Korean or English with Korean people, and navigating in Korea because English use is limited in Korean society. Other reasons for dissatisfaction included differences in foods between Korea and their home country, the administration at their language institute or university, the quality of education, stress and loneliness, and cultural differences and barriers. The findings on reasons for GKS students' dissatisfaction with life in Korea are illustrated in the word cloud in Figure 2.

Determinants of GKS students' satisfaction with life in Korea

The previous section showed GKS students' top reasons for satisfaction and dissatisfaction with life in Korea based on their own words from their answers to open-ended questions. The students' responses to the 2019 survey items on how satisfied they were with specific aspects of life in Korea confirmed the findings from the open-ended questions that the GKS students were the most satisfied with the infrastructure in Korea, closely followed by public

TABLE 4 Descriptive statistics of GKS recipients' satisfaction with specific aspects of life in Korea

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Public safety	9.18	1.78	734
Infrastructure in South Korea (e.g., transport, Internet availability, shops)	9.24	1.12	734
Social interaction with fellow students	7.62	2.08	728
Social interaction with Korean people	6.62	2.34	725
Quality of education at their language institute	8.03	2.17	682
Quality of education at their university	8.13	1.79	677
Financial support received as a GKS recipient	7.16	2.39	735
Cultural experiences (e.g., concerts, museums, tourism)	8.22	1.79	720
Natural environment/ecology	7.92	1.98	729
Availability of food meeting their dietary restrictions	7.19	2.49	710

Note: 1 = *very unsatisfied*, 10 = *very satisfied*.

interaction with people with whom they spoke their native language, or another language, and their level of Korean language ability were not significantly related to their satisfaction with life in Korea. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported, but Hypothesis 4 was rejected.

All four dimensions of the country image (i.e., functional, normative, aesthetic, and emotional) were positively associated with students' satisfaction with life in Korea. Hypotheses 5a, 5b, 5c, and 6 were, therefore, supported.

The analysis of the demographic variables also showed significant differences between some groups. Compared with men, women were less likely to be satisfied, after controlling for other variables. Students from developing countries tended to be more satisfied with life in Korea compared with those from developed countries, and those majoring in natural sciences or engineering fields showed higher levels of satisfaction than did those studying humanities or social sciences fields. The degree level pursued and the duration of stay in Korea were not significant variables in the model.

Liking the host country as a criterion for choosing the scholarship program was not a significant predictor of satisfaction with life in Korea, suggesting that the respondents were not necessarily predisposed to like the country or that their predisposition was diluted by their direct experiences in Korea. Other criteria for choosing the scholarship-providing country, such as the financial conditions of a scholarship and the quality of education in the host country, were also not significant.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As international student mobility has increased worldwide, governments have used international student mobility programs as a core tool of public diplomacy (Cull, 2008). For the purposes of public diplomacy, international students' satisfaction in government-sponsored international student mobility programs can be considered one of the most significant measures of the success of these programs. However, the positive outcomes of these programs are generally taken for granted and are only rarely assessed. It is important to note that international students may have negative experiences and be dissatisfied with life in the host country. In the present study, using the case of the GKS program operated by the Korean government, we examined the determinants of these international students' satisfaction in Korea.

TABLE 5 Determinants of GKS recipients' satisfaction with life in Korea: Multiple regression results

	<i>b</i>	SE
Gender (women)	-25.95*	12.86
Home country's level of economic development (ref. = developed)		
Developing	54.17*	21.83
Academic major (ref. = humanities or social sciences)		
Natural sciences or engineering	29.14*	13.48
Other	-33.42	23.82
Degree level (ref. = Bachelor's)		
Master's	2.57	15.11
PhD	-15.62	18.74
Start of stay in Korea (ref. = 2019)		
2018	10.42	16.08
2017	13.30	17.38
2016	-1.95	21.78
2015 or earlier	18.27	22.11
Criteria for choosing a scholarship program		
Financial conditions of the scholarship	-2.04	4.12
Quality of education at the host university	-1.41	4.04
Liking the destination country	3.09	3.47
Perception of treatment by Koreans		
Because of nationality	17.93*	8.57
Because of gender/sex	10.79	8.26
Because of ethnic identity	4.29	8.08
Because of religious identity	19.06**	6.88
Country image		
Functional	35.70**	10.48
Normative	18.58**	6.86
Aesthetic	49.31***	9.34
Emotional	26.62**	8.76
Frequency of interactions		
With people who speak their native language	4.94	5.17
With people who speak Korean	33.71***	6.64
With people who speak another language	1.83	6.09
Korean language ability	-7.11	8.19
Constant	-565.35*	73.62

Notes: Adjusted *R*-squared = .51; *N* = 735; ref.: reference category.

p* < .05; *p* < .01; ****p* < .001.

The results from the open-ended questions about GKS students' satisfaction and dissatisfaction with life in Korea in the 2018 survey and from students' self-reported levels of satisfaction with specific aspects of life in Korea in the 2019 survey revealed similar patterns. Descriptive statistics from the 2019 survey data indicate a high level of satisfaction with life in Korea among GKS students. The findings suggest that, on average, GKS students are



generally satisfied with all aspects of life in Korea. In the 2018 survey, the weighted mean for students' satisfaction with life in Korea was 5.7 out of 7. In the 2019 survey, their mean satisfaction with all aspects of life in Korea taken together was 7.93 out of 10, and the lowest mean score for satisfaction with a specific aspect of life in Korea was 6.62 out of 10. However, relatively speaking, the students were dissatisfied or less satisfied regarding some aspects of life in Korea, especially the level of financial support provided by the scholarship, the lack of social interactions with Koreans, language difficulties and the language barrier, and discrimination on the part of Koreans.

An interesting finding from the open-ended questions is that there are overlaps between the main reasons for satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Many GKS recipients reported social interaction with Koreans as their top reason for satisfaction (18%), and many also reported the lack of such interaction (12.4%) or perceived discrimination in their interaction with Koreans (9.6%) as their top reason for dissatisfaction. In a similar vein, university experiences were reported as a top reason for both satisfaction (17.6%) and dissatisfaction (6.9% + 5.6% = 12.5%). Furthermore, culture was a leading reason for satisfaction, appearing in 6.2% of the responses, whereas language (11.5%) and cultural (4.9%) barriers were mentioned as top reasons for dissatisfaction. It is not coincidental that these issues appear as reasons for both satisfaction and dissatisfaction. These qualitative findings suggest that students' social interactions with Koreans, satisfaction with university experiences, and appreciation of Korean culture likely determine their satisfaction with life in Korea—for better or worse.

The finding that length of stay in Korea does not affect students' satisfaction with life in the country adds another question mark to the U-curve hypothesis, which has previously produced mixed results. This finding supports Chien's (2016) conclusion that the U-curve hypothesis does not necessarily hold for international students' satisfaction with life in the host country.

Our results are also consistent with previous findings on international students in major destination countries and in Korea showing that these students may struggle because of academic, social, and language difficulties (Jeong, 2018; Sawir et al., 2008; Yan & Berliner, 2013). GKS students' perceptions of discrimination because of their nationality, gender/sex, ethnicity, or religion require attention, especially because the major target countries of the GKS program are developing countries. In this study, students from such countries tended to report experiences of discrimination, which is consistent with previous reports in the literature (Lee & Rice, 2007; Lee et al., 2017; Zoljargal & Chimed, 2014). However, although students from developing countries reported more dissatisfaction because of perceived discrimination in their responses to both the open-ended questions and the closed-ended items on perceived treatment, overall satisfaction was still significantly higher among this group than among students from developed countries. Among students from developing countries, the cognitive and affective appreciation of Korea and country image seem to be much stronger than it is for students from developed countries, leading to this outcome (see also Ayhan et al., 2021b). Negative experiences in the host country and subsequent consequences, such as sharing negative word-of-mouth about the host country with people in their home country (Ayhan & Gouda, 2021) or being reluctant to maintain positive relationships with people in the host country (Varpahovskis & Ayhan, 2020), could be detrimental to government scholarship programs' public diplomacy objectives.

Perceptions of treatment should be further analyzed in future studies by segmenting different demographic groups and analyzing differences in their perceptions of treatment by Koreans (e.g., Chinese vs. American students in perceptions of treatment because of their nationality, male vs. female students in perceptions of treatment because of their gender/sex, White vs. Black students in perceptions of treatment because of their ethnic identity, or Muslim vs. Christian students perceptions of treatment because of their religion).

Furthermore, although students' level of Korean language ability was not significantly related to their satisfaction with life in Korea in this study, their frequency of socializing with

people with whom they spoke Korean was a significant determinant of their satisfaction. In other words, it was not the level of their ability in Korean but rather their frequency of social interaction in the local language—most likely with local people—that contributed to determining their satisfaction with life in Korea. This result is in line with an extensive body of work on the role of social interaction with local students in international students' adjustment and satisfaction (see e.g., Brunsting et al., 2018; Cao et al., 2018; Geeraert et al., 2014; Hendrickson et al., 2011). This finding is particularly important given that the frequency of social interaction with people with whom they spoke their native language or another common language (most likely people from similar cultures) or with people with whom they spoke English (most likely other foreigners) did not affect their level of satisfaction with life in Korea. For international students, opportunities to socialize with local people contribute significantly to their satisfaction. This finding supports the relational public diplomacy objective of facilitating the building and managing of relationships between international students and the local population (see e.g., Varpahovskis, 2019; Yun, 2014). These efforts are crucial not only because such relationships can lead to mutual understanding and future collaboration (Cowan & Arsenault, 2008), but also because they contribute to the students' satisfaction, which is a precursor to other behaviors, as explained above. However, the low level of interaction between domestic and international students has consistently been a challenging issue (Quinton, 2020; Varpahovskis, 2019). Therefore, higher education institutions should facilitate international students' social interactions with diverse groups through curricular arrangements and extracurricular activities.

Among all the independent variables, all four dimensions of the country image had the highest associations with students' satisfaction with life in Korea. These findings suggest that, as long as students continue to hold positive beliefs about and attitudes toward Korea, they are likely to be satisfied with life in Korea. However, as stated above, the direction of this relationship is unclear, as satisfaction could also affect students' evaluations of the host country's image. International students' satisfaction with life in the host country and their cognitive and affective evaluations of the host country can create a vicious or virtuous cycle.

In terms of demographic characteristics, women were less satisfied compared with men, and those majoring in natural sciences or engineering fields were more satisfied compared with those studying humanities or social sciences fields. The latter finding is in line with reports by Ayhan and others (2021a, 2021b). Ayhan and others (2021a) found that students majoring in natural sciences or engineering fields evaluated Korea more positively compared with others. Natural sciences and engineering students' relatively high satisfaction may hint at a better quality of education in these fields, as satisfaction with the quality of education at the host country university was one of the items included in our overall satisfaction construct. This finding suggests that the Korean government should expand support for international students' study in natural sciences and engineering fields. At the same time, the government should also uncover the reasons for the relative dissatisfaction of women and students majoring in humanities or social sciences fields and improve these points to enhance GKS recipients' overall satisfaction.

Notably, GKS students' criteria for choosing a scholarship-providing country did not have a significant relationship with their satisfaction. This may indicate that their experiences in the host country are more important for their satisfaction compared with their initial criteria for choosing a country, suggesting that, even if international students studying in a particular country do have a predisposition toward the country,³ the effects of this predisposition will be diluted by the students' direct experiences in the country.

³A question in the 2019 survey asked students to rank their preference for scholarships from 13 scholarship-providing countries. The respondents indicated that Korea was their top preference as a country from which to receive a scholarship. On average, they ranked Korea (2.13) above both the United States (3.51) and the United Kingdom (3.53), which are top destinations for international students. Additionally, about 58% said that they would still have chosen to study in Korea even if they had not received the GKS. This result indicates an initial predisposition toward Korea.



A major difficulty in using international student mobility programs as a tool of public diplomacy is that most program outcomes—both negative and positive—are produced outside the control of the program sponsor (Ayhan, 2020). Our findings confirm that students' satisfaction with life in Korea depends significantly on their social interactions with Koreans, be it their professors, fellow students, friends, neighbors, or other people they encounter in their daily lives. Our findings reveal two faces of international students' social interactions: more interaction with Koreans corresponds to more satisfaction with life in Korea, and greater feelings of being discriminated against by Koreans corresponds to less satisfaction. Regarding the former relationship, the NIIED can encourage universities to increase opportunities for more genuine and dialogical social interactions between international students and Koreans. Here, by "genuine" and "dialogical," we mean positive contact where international students and Koreans meet with more or less equal status (as opposed to, e.g., Korean administrators mentoring international students) and collaborate around shared objectives or concerns (e.g., working on a climate action project) (Cowan & Arsenault, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 2011; Kent & Taylor, 2002). Compared with programs that are intended only for international students (e.g., lectures on traditional Korean culture), programs that bring Korean and international students together allow these groups to build relationships and thereby facilitate mutual understanding, which will potentially contribute to higher levels of satisfaction among international students by encouraging positive interactions with Korean students (Çuhadar & Dayton, 2011).

A society-wide effort is needed to eliminate or reduce international students' perceptions of discrimination. It is possible that students' perceptions of discrimination sometimes stem from Korean people's lack of knowledge or their insufficient experience interacting with people from developing countries, rather than from intentional discrimination. As Korea has become increasingly multicultural, the Korean government has introduced policies reflecting these changes (e.g., the recent shift in Korean secondary school textbooks from defining Korea as a one-race society to defining the country as a multicultural society) and aiming to facilitate global awareness (e.g., the cooperation by the Ministry of Culture and UNESCO to introduce the global cultures of international residents to Korean children). These aspects of current trends in Korea are promising, but more may be needed to mainstream multiculturalism throughout Korean society. For example, the idea of antidiscrimination and hate speech laws has thus far faced strong opposition in Korea. The media's role in creating stereotypes of foreigners is also an important issue in Korea that is difficult for the government or universities to tackle.

This study has shown that GKS recipients have multifaceted experiences of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in Korea and that multiple determinants are related to their level of satisfaction. Clearly, the positive experiences of international students receiving government-sponsored scholarships cannot be taken for granted. Coordinated efforts at the university, government, and societal levels are required to enhance international students' satisfaction and eventually fulfill the public diplomacy objectives of such international student mobility programs.

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APPENDIX 1

Country image: Items for the functional, normative, aesthetic, and emotional dimensions

Variable	Item
Functional 1	South Korea's economy is highly innovative and suitable for the future
Functional 2	South Korea produces very high-quality goods and services
Functional 3	South Korea has highly competent entrepreneurs
Functional 4	South Korea is very wealthy
Functional 5	South Korea is technologically highly advanced
Functional 6	South Korea holds a strong position in the global economy
Functional 7	The labor market in South Korea is equipped with highly competent people
Functional 8	South Korea has a globally influential culture
Functional 9	Athletes and sports teams from South Korea are internationally known for their success
Functional 10	Competent officials govern South Korean politics
Functional 11	South Korea has a very stable political system
Functional 12	South Korea has a well-functioning infrastructure
Functional 13	South Korea provides a well-functioning welfare system and pension plans
Functional 14	South Korea is highly innovative in science and research
Functional 15	South Korea provides great educational opportunities
Functional 16	The level of education in South Korea is very high
Normative 1	South Korea does a good job of protecting the environment
Normative 2	South Korea is known for its strong commitment to social issues (e.g., development aid and civil rights)
Normative 3	South Korea has high ethical standards
Normative 4	South Korea is a socially responsible member of the international community
Normative 5	South Korea respects the values of other nations and peoples
Normative 6	South Korea takes responsibility for helping in international crises
Normative 7	South Korea is a welcoming country

(Continues)



APPENDIX 1 (Continued)

Variable	Item
Normative 8	South Korea has excellent civil rights
Normative 9	South Korea has a very just welfare system
Normative 10	South Korea acts very fairly in international politics
Aesthetic 1	South Korea is home to beautiful cultural assets (e.g., arts, architecture, music, and film)
Aesthetic 2	South Korea has delicious foods and a wonderful cuisine
Aesthetic 3	South Korea has a very fascinating history
Aesthetic 4	South Korea has rich traditions
Aesthetic 5	South Korea has beautiful scenery
Aesthetic 6	South Korea has a great deal of well-preserved nature
Aesthetic 7	South Korea has many charismatic people (e.g., in politics, sports, and the media)
Emotional 1	I like South Korea
Emotional 2	South Korea is an attractive country
Emotional 3	South Korea is fascinating
Emotional 4	If somebody speaks negatively about South Korea, it bothers me