

Evaluations of people, affection, and recommendation for a host country: A study of Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) recipients

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Abstract

Extant research has examined the significance of interpersonal relationships in affecting public diplomacy outcomes. Relational public diplomacy is a long-term approach to public diplomacy which posits the importance of people-to-people exchange programs that facilitate two-way interactions between people from two different countries. Using survey data ($n = 385$) collected from alumni of the Global Korea Scholarship in 2018, this study found that respondents' perceptions of treatment by South Korean people influenced their comparisons of people from South Korea and their home countries. Moreover, the more highly they evaluated South Koreans compared to people in their home countries, the more likely it was that they would develop an affection and make positive recommendations toward South Korea as a destination for study and tourism. The empirical findings in this article have policy implications for scholarship programs as a public diplomacy tool beyond South Korea.

KEYWORDS

affection, Asia, Global Korea Scholarship, *P&P* Special Issue, people-to-people exchanges, public diplomacy, South Korea

Related Articles in this Special Issue

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Lee, Hyelim, and Nancy Snow. 2021. "Gendered Experience in Student Mobility Programs—Global Korea Scholarship Recipients' Evaluation of Korea's Country Image." *Politics & Policy* 49(6): 1343–1358. <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12441>.



Public diplomacy is a subset of communication-based activities “to understand, inform, influence and build relationships with foreign publics” (Leonard & Small, 2003, p. 13), ultimately to advance a country’s interests in line with its foreign policy objectives (Ayhan, 2019; Gregory, 2008; Sevin, 2017). In the concept’s six-decade history, public diplomacy has evolved from a one-way informational tool to involve more two-way relational processes (Snow, 2009; Zaharna, 2009). Over the past two decades, researchers have argued for a normative *relational* approach to public diplomacy, one that emphasizes the principle of symmetry (Grunig, 1993b) and the pursuit of mutual understanding and mutual interests (Fitzpatrick, 2017). Governments that adopt the relational approach would support programs that promote two-way understanding and influence—such as educational and cultural exchanges (Cull, 2008). This form of public diplomacy promotes dialogue and exchange of viewpoints at an interpersonal level. It is a long-term approach that complements the two other approaches to public diplomacy: mediated public diplomacy (a short-/medium-term approach to influence foreign media coverage) and nation branding (a medium-/long-term approach to build a country’s brand through advertising) (Golan, 2013; Golan & Yang, 2015).

Of the different types of public diplomacy programs, cultural and educational exchange programs have been argued to be the most effective in removing cultural barriers and reducing biases and stereotypes (Cull, 2019; Kim, 2016). Kim (2016) found that participants in the Humphrey Fellowship Program had gained a better understanding of, and had changed their prior misperceptions about, the United States. As early as the 1990s, Sunal and Sunal (1991) found from participants in the Fulbright program that the program had resulted in positive long-term and continuous effects in networking. Despite the relatively short duration of cultural and educational exchange programs, these programs facilitate interpersonal interactions that create relationship linkages between and among people that result in attitudinal and behavioral shifts toward the host country (Yun, 2012; Yun & Vibber, 2012). Nevertheless, Yun (2012) notes that such relationship linkages could also present challenges because participants could have negative experiences in the host country. At the same time, their experiences could be strained when their everyday experiences with host country nationals conflicted with their host country’s negative media coverage about their home country (Yun & Vibber, 2012). While the effects of these programs are not entirely symmetrical—such that it is common for students from the foreign country to be more influenced than students from the host country—the desire and efforts to maintain personal relationships after their experiences remain the single area in which symmetry is found (Yun, 2015).

Considering the importance of people’s experiences of host country nationals in affecting their desire to maintain relationship linkages, based on the belief–attitude–behavioral model in the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), we explore how Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) alumni’s perceptions of treatment by host country nationals affected their comparison of their home and host country nationals, their affection for the host country, and their intention to recommend South Korea (hereafter, Korea) as a place for tourism and study. By examining the evaluations of people as an antecedent, this study contributes to research in relational public diplomacy as well as intercultural studies and social psychology in several ways.

First, existing research on exchange programs has highlighted the benefits (see e.g., Kim, 2016; Sunal & Sunal, 1991) and the risks (see e.g., Yun & Vibber, 2012) of the programs for its sponsors (i.e., the host country); as well as the participants’ desire to maintain interpersonal relationships with host country nationals after the programs (Varpahovskis & Ayhan, 2020; Yun, 2014). Previous literature has examined host country nationals’ attitudes toward expatriates and its effects (Arman & Aycan, 2013), international students’ expectations and desire to make friends with host country nationals and its effects (Gareis et al., 2011), and the importance of social interactions with host country nationals in students’ adjustments to adapt in foreign environments (Pedersen et al., 2011). But no studies to date have focused on evaluations of host



country nationals as an antecedent that affected their attitude and behavioral intention toward a host country.

Second, social psychology theories (e.g., social identity theory) have proposed that contact between ethnic groups could increase understanding, empathy, and trust and thus prevent the clustering of people into in-groups (i.e., people like us) and out-groups (i.e., people unlike us) (Cuhadar & Dayton, 2011). Intergroup contact as well as the quality of the encounters improved attitudes toward foreigners (Shamloo et al., 2018) and reduce prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Interactions with host country nationals underscore the premise of relational public diplomacy and affect host country identification and attitudes and behavioral intentions (Waßmuth & Edinger-Schons, 2018). Despite this, the question of *how* this happens (i.e., factors which explain the influence of people-to-people interactions on public diplomacy outcomes) remains underexplored.

Last, research on attitudes toward foreigners has measured attitudes toward *all* foreigners in general but respondents think of different groups when responding (Asbrock et al., 2014). Thus, this study contributes to existing research by: (a) exploring the evaluations of people as an antecedent; (b) operationalizing attitudes toward foreigners by measuring perceptions of treatment and comparison of home and host country nationals; and (c) specifically examining the alumni of the GKS program as research participants and South Korean people (i.e., Koreans) as a specific group of foreigners (i.e., host country nationals).

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Studies adopting the belief–attitude–behavior model suggest that people’s beliefs about, and attitudes toward, an object determine their behavioral intention related to that object (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Studies on country image show that individuals’ beliefs about, and attitudes toward, a country determine their behavioral intention related to that country (Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015; Varpahovskis & Ayhan, 2020; Yun, 2014). Country image, in this context, refers to people’s perceptions of a country based on their beliefs about, and attitudes toward, that country (Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015; Kelman, 1965; Kotler et al., 1993; Nadeau & Olafsen, 2015).

Nevertheless, individuals’ perceptions of a foreign country could differ because they could be formed based on different experiences of the country, some of which are direct (e.g., exchange programs) and some of which are mediated (e.g., media coverage) (Golan & Yang, 2015). The totality of foreign individuals’ experiences—including with the host country nationals, the culture, the values, the nature, the political system, and the economy of the host country—provide both difficulties and opportunities to analyze the country as an object in belief–attitude–behavior studies. The difficulties lie in making the connection between beliefs about, and attitudes toward, different aspects of a country and behaviors related to the country. The opportunities also stem from the same difficulty. There is room for testing alternative hypotheses on different aspects of this connection.

Until now, most studies focused on a relatively straightforward application of belief–attitude–behavior theories to the cases of countries, by creating belief and attitude constructs whereby they asked the respondents questions about a country’s values, political system, economy, culture, and nature (Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015; Yun, 2014). However, most of these studies were not tailored to the case of foreigners who have direct experiences in the country (Varpahovskis & Ayhan, 2020). According to Kim and others (2020), individuals with and without first-hand experiences with a country undergo two different “modes” in their evaluations of, and behavioral intentions toward, a foreign country. Individuals with first-hand experiences tend to evaluate a country based on their individualized experiences with the country, while individuals without first-hand experiences would rely on secondary sources like media coverage to form perceptions

of the country before evaluating the country's reputation. Tam and others (2018) found that those with first-hand experiences generally evaluate a country more favorably.

Despite this, the interactions and experiences with host country nationals have not been specifically explored in existing studies as an antecedent to attitude and behavioral intentions toward a country but as a dimension within country beliefs or country reputation or its outcome. For example, Yun (2015) explored evaluations of foreign nationals as a dimension within country belief. Jain and Winner (2013) explored the evaluation of people as a dimension within country reputation. Varpahovskis and Ayhan (2020) found that the country image held by alumni from the GKS program was positively related to their relationship maintenance behaviors with Korean people. In this article, as opposed to previous studies that focus on country-level beliefs, we focus on how foreign students' personal perceptions of treatments and comparative beliefs about host country nationals influence their affection for, and behavioral intention toward, the host country.

Perceptions of treatment and comparison of people

Interactions with host country nationals, and perceptions of positive or negative treatment or discrimination help form beliefs about them, and by extension about the country. Social psychology theories, such as contact theory (Allport, 1954) and social identity theory (Tajfel et al., 1971), suggest that intergroup contact can help shape beliefs about, attitudes toward, and behaviors related to the other groups (Cuhadar & Dayton, 2011). These studies suggest that positive intergroup contact can facilitate more positive evaluation of the other (Pettigrew, 1986). Social identity theory proposes that people favor in-groups by default (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel et al., 1971). According to this theory, foreign students' negative perceptions of treatment by host country nationals are expected to facilitate more in-group favoritism whereas positive perceptions of treatment are expected to facilitate less in-group favoritism. In turn, the more foreign students perceive positive treatment by host country nationals, the more highly they will evaluate host country nationals in comparison to their home country nationals (Kogan et al., 2018). Foreign students do not form beliefs about host country people in a vacuum. Their experiences with host country nationals lead students to make comparisons between host country and home country nationals (Cantwell et al., 2009). A study on international students as sojourners also found that their identification with host country nationals attenuated the negative effects of perceived discrimination and that their identification with their home countries aggravated the negative effects of symbolic threat (Bierwiazzonek et al., 2017). This points to the need for examining how foreign individuals make evaluations of host country nationals and home country nationals because of their experiences. Based on the premise of the social identity theory (Tajfel et al., 1971), it is proposed that individuals could use in-groups (i.e., home country nationals) as a baseline reference point when evaluating out-groups (i.e., host country nationals). Thus, we propose to examine a comparison of home and host country nationals with the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 *Perceptions of treatment by host country nationals are positively associated with comparison between home and host country nationals.*

Affection and recommendation

Migration and sojourner studies show that foreigners' direct experiences with host country nationals, particularly perceptions of discrimination, determine their satisfaction (Safi, 2010; Sam, 2001; Wadsworth et al., 2008) and adaptation in the host country (Sodowsky & Plake, 1992; Wadsworth et al., 2008; Ward, 2001). Satisfaction, in turn, facilitates positive attitudes toward the host country (cf. Kim & Suh, 2006; Seo, 2013) and positive word-of-mouth about

the country (Paswan & Ganesh, 2009; Shafaei & Razak, 2016; Szymanski & Henard, 2001; Tam et al., 2018). Research on German students who studied abroad in Indonesia found that contact with host country nationals positively affected identification with the host country and that this relationship was mediated by a change in the individuals' own cultural identities (Waßmuth & Edinger-Schons, 2018).

In the context of public diplomacy, the effects of the experiences of host country nationals can be applied to sojourners, immigrants, tourists, students, etc., in a foreign country. Even though cultural and educational exchange programs, as public diplomacy initiatives, should ideally result in symmetrical effects (Yun, 2015), governments are strategic in their public diplomacy efforts to increase the curiosity, interest, and affection of foreign nationals. The main underlying premise of scholarship programs for foreign students is to expose them to first-hand experiences that will form their beliefs about the country, generate positive attitudes toward the country, and in turn create host country-friendly networks and positive behaviors related to the country (Scott-Smith, 2009). These experiences are the "substance" that refers to the special, individualized experiences which are different from the "image" which involves the stereotypical images portrayed in the mass media (Choi et al., 2019; Grunig, 1993a; Tam et al., 2018; Vibber & Kim, 2021). Individuals with positive experiences and attitudes toward a host country and its institutions reported positive behavioral intentions toward the country such as the intention to visit and study abroad (Lee & Jun, 2013) and made positive recommendations through word-of-mouth (Tam et al., 2018; Vibber & Kim, 2021). Based on the discussion above, we propose the following additional hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2 *Comparison between host and home country nationals has a positive relationship with affection for the host country.*

Hypothesis 3 *Affection for the host country has a positive association with recommendation as a place for: (a) study and (b) tourism.*

Figure 1 shows the conceptualization of this study.

THE GKS PROGRAM

In the context of relational public diplomacy, the government's role is often limited to providing the scholarship, selecting the students, and coordinating with their host universities, particularly in the case of long-term scholarship programs (Ayhan, 2020). Despite governments' public diplomacy aims in facilitating mutual understanding through these scholarship programs, most public diplomacy outcomes at the people-to-people level are beyond government control. Governments also have little control over the experiences of the foreign students in those programs (Ayhan, 2020). Using the alumni of the GKS scholarship as our sample, this study seeks to uncover how interpersonal relationships, as an experiential antecedent of the

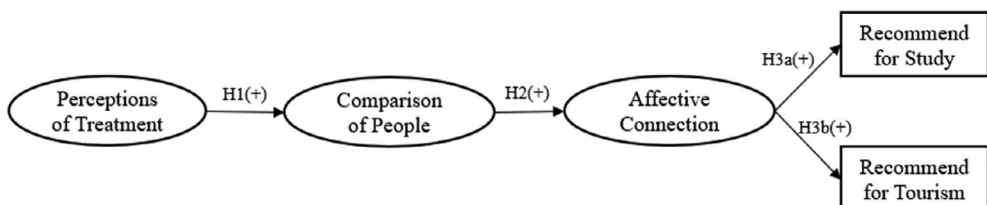


FIGURE 1 Conceptualization of the model to be tested

multifaceted experiences of these students, affect their formation of attitudes and behavioral intentions toward South Korea as a host country.

GKS is the South Korean government's scholarship program for foreign students to enroll in undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs in the country, aiming to nurture Korea-friendly young opinion leaders and build networks with their home countries by offering students scholarships (Chöngwadae, 2009; National Institute for International Education, 2021). GKS offers scholarships to foreign students for undergraduate and graduate degrees in Korea. Korean language is not a prerequisite for getting the scholarship, but before beginning their degree programs, students are required to be fluent in Korean. Unless students provide a TOPIK exam result, they begin their education in Korea with one year of Korean language training at Korean universities. In most cases, the alumni spend a minimum of three years in the country (one year in language education and three years in a master's program), while it is longer for undergraduate and doctoral students and for those who remain in the country after their graduation.

GKS benchmarks the American Fulbright Program and the Japanese MEXT Scholarship Program (Chöngwadae, 2009, p. 14; see also National Institute for International Education, 2016, p. 14). Following the examples of these two programs, GKS aims "to build a Korea-friendly network of young talents and to improve Korea's nation brand value" (Chöngwadae, 2009, pp. 14–5). The official introduction of GKS cites Fulbright's success in nurturing 39 Nobel laureates and 18 state leaders (Chöngwadae, 2009, p. 14). In other words, Korea emulates the developed countries' scholarship programs, building on the underlying premise of the opinion-leader model (see Scott-Smith, 2008). While the scale of GKS had been smaller than other developed countries' scholarship programs, it is growing fast. From 1967 until 2019, Korea has invited an accumulated number of around 10,000 students (National Institute for International Education, 2019), and annually invites over 800 students following the program's revitalization in mid-2008, which peaked at 1300 students (220 undergraduate and 1080 graduate students) in 2021 (National Institute for International Education, 2021). For comparison, the United States' Fulbright Foreign Student Program annually invites 4000 international students from around the world (Fulbright Foreign Student Program, 2021), while the British Chevening offers around 1500 scholarships a year (Chevening Scholarships, 2019).

METHODS

Development of measures

We examined five variables in this study: perceptions of treatment by Korean people, comparison between home and host country nationals, affection, recommendation of South Korea as a place for study, and tourism. The variable of perceptions of treatment was measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (negatively) to 5 (positively) using four items that asked respondents to evaluate how they were treated by South Koreans due to their: (a) nationality, (b) gender/sex, (c) ethnic identity, and (d) religious identity. The variable for comparison of people were adapted from the World Values Survey (Inglehart et al., 2014, pp. V12–V22). On a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (worse) to 5 (better), respondents were asked "Comparing your home country with South Korea, would you say that South Koreans differ from citizens of your home country in the following characteristics?" in terms of: (a) hard work, (b) feeling of responsibility, (c) imagination, (d) tolerance and respect for other people, (e) religious faith, (f) selflessness, and (g) self-expression. For the variable of affection, the items were adapted from Buhmann's (2016) emotional dimension in the 4D Model of Country Image. On a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), respondents were asked how much they agree with the following statements: "I like South Korea;" "South Korea is an attractive



country;” and “South Korea is fascinating.” For the variable of positive recommendation, respondents were asked to evaluate the extent to which they agree with the following two statements, respectively: on a 5-point Likert scale from “I recommend South Korea to friends, family members, and acquaintances as a place for full-time study;” and “I recommend South Korea to friends, family members, and acquaintances for tourism.”

Participant recruitment and data collection

We used the GKS dataset which was created and collected by Ayhan et al. (2021; see also Ayhan & Gouda, 2021; Ayhan, Gouda & Lee, 2021; Varpahovskis & Ayhan, 2020). They sent an online survey, using SurveyMonkey, to 3831 GKS alumni on June 7, 2018 with the help of the National Institute for International Education which runs the scholarship program. At that time, 741 alumni responded to the survey. Responses that had missing values were removed from the analysis. As a result, a total of 385 responses were used for the analysis.

Demographics

Of the 385 respondents, 14.8% ($n = 57$) were undergraduate students, 66% ($n = 254$) were master’s students, and 19.2% ($n = 74$) were PhD students. For gender, 50.9% ($n = 196$) were female and 49.1% ($n = 189$) were male. As for ethnicity, 49.4% ($n = 190$) were identified as Asian (except ethnic Korean), 19.5% ($n = 75$) were identified as Caucasian, 15.6% ($n = 60$) were identified as Black, 3.9% ($n = 15$) were ethnic Koreans, and 11.7% ($n = 45$) were identified as belonging to other ethnicities. The number of years they had spent in Korea ranged from one to 12 years with the largest group (27.3%, $n = 105$) spending four years and the second largest group (24.7%, $n = 95$) spending five years there.

Data analysis

Before proceeding with hypotheses testing, we conducted exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on the survey items using Maximum Likelihood with Promax Rotation (Carpenter, 2018). EFA, rather than confirmatory factor analysis, was deemed appropriate for this study because the survey items were used for the first time in this study context involving the selected group of participants (Yong & Pearce, 2013). EFA helps to establish the construct validity of the instruments used for each item while also addressing multicollinearity (Williams et al., 2010). For the variable, treatment by host country nationals, four items were proposed and were retained with factor loadings ranging from .640 to .899. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of adequacy was .780 and the Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant, indicating the adequacy of the items in explaining the variable. The items explained 68.59% of the variance. For the variable comparison of host and home country nationals, 11 items were proposed but only seven were retained with factor loadings ranging from .539 to .885. Items with factor loadings of lower than .50 were removed (Costello & Osborne, 2005). The KMO measure of adequacy was .759 and the Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant, indicating the adequacy of the items in explaining the variable. The items explained 59.35% of the variance. Two dimensions were identified. The first dimension consisted of two items (hard work and responsibility) and the second consisted of five items (imagination, tolerance and respect for other people, religious faith, selflessness, and self-expression). For the variable affection, four items were proposed and one was dropped due to low factor loading. The KMO measure of adequacy was .893 and the Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant, indicating the adequacy of the items in

TABLE 1 Factor loadings, mean, standard deviation, and standard error of the mean for each survey item (α = Cronbach's alpha, M = mean, SD = standard deviation, SE = standard error)

Variable	Survey item	Loading	M	SD	SE
Treatment by Koreans $\alpha = .847$	Please indicate, on average, how you were treated by South Koreans due to your: [Nationality]	.832	3.89	1.07	.055
	Please indicate, on average, how you were treated by South Koreans due to your: [Gender/Sex]	.665	4.09	.945	.048
	Please indicate, on average, how you were treated by South Koreans due to your: [Ethnic Identity]	.899	3.84	1.095	.056
	Please indicate, on average, how you were treated by South Koreans due to your: [Religious Identity]	.640	3.83	1.017	.052
Comparison of people $\alpha = .756$	Comparing your home country with South Korea, would you say that South Koreans differ from citizens of your home country in the following characteristics? [Hard work] (Factor 1)	.885	4.37	.822	.042
	Comparing your home country with South Korea, would you say that South Koreans differ from citizens of your home country in the following characteristics? [Feeling of responsibility] (Factor 1)	.618	4.11	.945	.048
	Comparing your home country with South Korea, would you say that South Koreans differ from citizens of your home country in the following characteristics? [Imagination] (Factor 2)	.626	3.31	1.268	.065
	Comparing your home country with South Korea, would you say that South Koreans differ from citizens of your home country in the following characteristics? [Tolerance and respect for other people] (Factor 2)	.584	3.20	1.18	.060
	Comparing your home country with South Korea, would you say that South Koreans differ from citizens of your home country in the following characteristics? [Religious faith] (Factor 2)	.539	2.89	1.14	.058
	Comparing your home country with South Korea, would you say that South Koreans differ from citizens of your home country in the following characteristics? [Selflessness] (Factor 2)	.570	3.08	1.176	.060
	Comparing your home country with South Korea, would you say that South Koreans differ from citizens of your home country in the following characteristics? [Self-expression] (Factor 2)	.711	2.88	.068	1.325
Affective connection $\alpha = .893$	I like South Korea	.882	6.26	1.006	.051
	South Korea is an attractive country	.880	6.24	.972	.050
	South Korea is fascinating	.817	6.15	1.029	.052
Recommendation for study	I recommend South Korea to friends, family members, and acquaintances as a place for full-time study	N.A.	4.35	.946	.048
Recommendation for tourism	I recommend South Korea to friends, family members, and acquaintances for tourism	N.A.	4.78	.568	.029



explaining the latent variable. The items explained 82.6% of the variance. Last, for recommendation, the two items were analyzed separately because they do not load onto the same variable. Table 1 shows all the survey items used, their factor loadings, mean, standard deviation (SD), standard error (SE), and the Cronbach's alpha (α) of the variable as an indicator of their reliability. EFA was first conducted on all variables to uncover the patterns of the items within each variable to ensure that the items which were designed to adapt to the present context for the present sample are appropriate and adequate and to help explore the dimensionality of the variables (Williams et al., 2010). Structural equation modeling (SEM) was then performed to test the hypotheses on AMOS (version 25). AMOS uses a covariance-based approach to SEM and helps to identify the salience of the latent constructs and to evaluate causal relationships in the model (Hair et al., 2014). SEM was deemed an appropriate analytical technique for this study because it helped to test the hypothesized relationships in a comprehensive model with multiple variables while also considering the error terms which cannot be uncovered using multiple regression (MacCallum & Austin, 2000). In addition, as this study has multiple constructs, each of which is measured using multiple survey items, SEM is more effective than multiple regression in finding the best-fitting model for both the complex relationships among the latent variables and the relationships between the latent variables and the measurement items (Nusair & Hua, 2010).

FINDINGS

Figure 2 shows the standardized regression weights (β) of the causal relationships and the variance explained of endogenous variables (R^2). The results showed that the association between perceptions of treatment and comparison of home and host country nationals is significant as hypothesized ($\beta = .582, p < .001$), so Hypothesis 1 is supported. Likewise, the hypothesized relationship between comparison of home and host country nationals and emotional connection with Korea is also positive ($\beta = .677, p < .001$), hence Hypothesis 2 is supported. Hypothesis 3a and Hypothesis 3b are also supported as the hypothesized relationship between affection and recommendation of Korea for study ($\beta = .414, p < .001$) and recommendation of Korea for tourism ($\beta = .545, p < .001$) are both significant. An additional significant path was found between comparison of people and recommendation for study ($\beta = .276, p < .01$). The model explains 40.1% and 29.8% of the variance in the behavioral intention to recommend Korea for study and for tourism, respectively. It also achieves a satisfactory model fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.335$ ($p = .000$), CFI = .949, RMSEA = .059, SRMR = .0619) according to Hu and Bentler's (1999) cut-off criteria or fit indices ($\chi^2/df < 3$, CFI $> .95$, RMSEA $< .06$, SRMR $< .08$). Figure 2 shows the model with the significant paths.

DISCUSSION

The significance of host country nationals in the overall experiences of foreign visitors to a country should not be underestimated. While people without first-hand experiences of a foreign country often rely on limited stereotypical images presented in the media to learn about foreign countries and foreign peoples, the images of foreign peoples are "subject to a more complex and situated formation process with the evolution of sociological globalization" (Yun & Kim, 2008, p. 567). The increased mobility among people contributed to the more frequent contact and interactions among people in different countries. Yun and Kim (2008, p. 568) further added that the favorability between people of different backgrounds is "deeply rooted in people's life experiences and social learning of each individual member of an ethnic group and of each ethnic group as a whole." This social learning helps to form a psychological attribute and cognitive

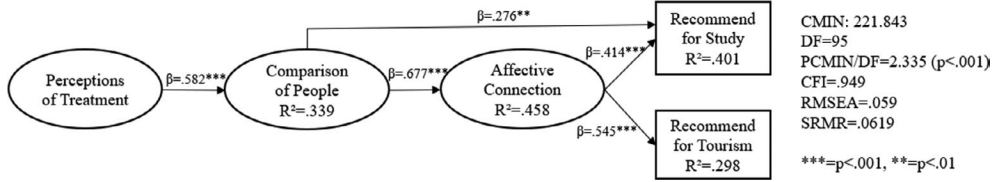


FIGURE 2 Results from the model tested

shortcut that contributes to their overall attitude toward foreign countries. This favorability to foreign people can lead to affection toward the country from which they originate.

Despite the accumulated evidence that people-to-people interactions reduce prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) and increase favorability toward foreign countries (Kim, 2016), the question of *how* has remained unexplored. In the context of the alumni of the GKS program, based on the belief–attitude–behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), this study proposed that people-to-people interactions would result in individuals’ perceptions of treatment by host country nationals and their comparison of home and host country nationals. Subsequently, this affected their attitudes and behavioral intentions toward the host country. Particularly, in addition to measuring perceptions of treatments as an antecedent, this study proposed the measurement of the comparison of home and host country nationals because individuals would use their home country nationals as a baseline reference point when evaluating host country nationals. This operationalization also contributes to research on intercultural studies and social psychology by extending the operationalization of the measurement of attitudes toward foreigners and specifying South Korean people as a specific group of foreigners being measured (as opposed to *all* foreigners) (Asbrock et al., 2014).

It is worth noting that foreign nationals often form their expectations of, and desire toward, a country because of their consumption of images from the mass media and cultural products (Yun, 2015) and thus the inconsistency between images and experiences could lead to a more positive or a more negative perception of treatment. Based on social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974), humans have a tendency of looking for patterns that lead to the formation of in-groups (i.e., people who are in our social group, however, minimal the group may be) and out-groups (i.e., people who are outside of our group). This categorization, in turn, causes them to set expectations and guides their behaviors toward in-groups and out-groups in their interactions. Without interventions or changed life experiences—such as social interactions with host country nationals which increased foreign nationals’ identification with host cultures and decreased their identification with their home countries (see e.g., Pedersen et al., 2011)—the tendency of individuals to cluster people into in-groups and out-groups could trigger inter-group conflict as they desire to maintain personal and group self-esteem that perpetrates biases and stereotypes toward out-groups (Cuhadar & Dayton, 2011). For example, Arman and Aycan’s (2013) study found that a host country’s nationals could be hostile toward expatriates when they prefer local managers rather than foreign managers and would be kind toward them when they prefer foreign managers rather than local managers. This preference could be caused by their experiences of treatment by expatriates as well as their comparison of managers from home and foreign countries.

Consistent with findings from previous studies, this study found that interpersonal interactions are important to creating favorability between and among people from different countries. It also found that perceptions of treatment could be formed on the basis of how they felt they were treated because of their nationality, gender/sex, ethnic identity, and religious identity—the categories based on which people differentiated between in-groups and out-groups. At the same time, it is important to recognize that people make comparisons between



home and host country nationals based on some reference point. This reference point is often how they evaluate host country nationals compared to their home country nationals. When individuals have limited engagement with host country nationals, or when there is a discrepancy in the amount of actual and desired intercultural contact, foreign nationals could experience difficulties in adjusting to the host cultures (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 2000). In this study, the comparison of people was operationalized using indicators like hard work, feelings of responsibility, imagination, tolerance and respect for other people, religious faith, selflessness, and self-expression. These indicators reflect the evaluations of how one acts toward others, presumably reflecting how a comparison of home and host cultures influence affective connection and behavioral intention toward a host country.

Government roles in educational and cultural exchange programs are often limited to administration and coordination (see e.g., Ayhan, 2020). However, the policy implications of the present study suggest governments may consider investigating specifically into the experiential journeys of participants in these programs during their residence in their countries and investing resources into designing events and activities which promote mutual exchanges through intercultural friendships. Yun and Vibber (2012) found that Chinese students' perceptions of discrimination from Koreans and Korean media's distorted coverage of Chinese affairs—which were accumulated through their day-to-day experiences of interacting with Koreans and living in Korea—to contribute to an anti-Korean sentiment. Such a sentiment was also shared with other fellow Chinese such as their friends and families and on the Internet (Yun & Vibber, 2012). Even though symmetry is more easily achieved through interpersonal exchanges between people of different countries of origins (Yun, 2015), it is also possible that these direct experiences could further perpetrate ethnocentrism (Yun & Vibber, 2012). Foreign students tend to have a high expectation to engage in social interactions with host country nationals. When experiences do not meet these expectations, it negatively affects their identification with the host cultures and their adjustment into the foreign environments (Pedersen et al., 2011). However, ensuring that foreign nationals feel welcomed and treated well in their host countries requires further collaboration among the governments that administer these programs, the institutions that execute these programs, and the host country nationals with whom foreign nationals have interactions on a daily basis (Lee & Ayhan, 2015). Also, in measuring the success of these programs, administrators could consider the measurement of perceptions of treatment by host country nationals and comparison of home and host country nationals as variables that reflect participants' evaluations of their experiences of people-to-people interactions.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study have presented the positive aspect of the formation of interpersonal connections through educational programs. When recipients of the GKS scholarship felt that they were treated well by host country nationals, they would evaluate host country nationals more favorably than their home country nationals. This, in turn, increased their affection toward the host country and their intention to recommend it as a destination for study and tourism. The effects of interpersonal interactions are a two-way street. As Yun (2015) identified that the effects are normally not symmetrical and Arman and Aycan (2013) found that the attitude of host country nationals toward foreign nationals affected their behaviors toward them, it is necessary to also examine how nationals in the host country (South Korea) perceived they were treated by participants in the GKS program and how they compared them against South Koreans.

This study advances research on relational public diplomacy by incorporating theories in social psychology and intercultural studies to conceptualize and operationalize how attitudes toward foreigners (South Koreans as host country nationals in this context) affect attitudes and behavioral intentions toward a host country. The operationalization of treatments by host

country nationals and comparison of home and host country nationals suggest that individuals may use home country nationals as a baseline reference point when making this evaluation. This operationalization could be used to evaluate the success of people-to-people programs as an antecedent to attitudes and behavioral intentions in future studies. At the same time, this operationalization could also help administrators identify how program participants from different countries may differ in their evaluations because of differences in their baseline reference points. Program administrators may use such data to tailor specific details in people-to-people programs for program participants from different countries.

Limitations

Although it is invaluable to conduct this study on a dataset of foreign nationals who have direct experiences with a host country, one of the limitations of this study is that the conceptualizations and analyses were made based on a pre existing dataset. While EFA and SEM were conducted to make sure that the measurement items reflected the underlying latent constructs and that the hypothesized relationships were analyzed in a comprehensive model, further replication studies could be done to explore whether the same constructs and measurement items would work in other contexts. How foreign nationals evaluate host country nationals could be further explored as a complex phenomenon involving their relationships with different people (e.g., their peers, their professors, and their day-to-day interactions with others). It is possible that relationships with different people and evaluations of them should be conceptualized and measured differently. And their effects on relational public diplomacy may also differ.

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