

# Branding Korea as "My Friend's Country": The Case of VANK's Cyber Public Diplomats

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The role of non-state actors in public diplomacy remains an unsettled question in the literature. However, various transnational activities of non-state actors are often called public diplomacy, without discrimination. The lack of empirical studies on non-state public diplomacy is to blame for this conceptual confusion. Analytical and empirical studies of non-state public diplomacy are needed to consolidate this phenomenon, which is relatively new, while maintaining the conceptual clarity of public diplomacy. This study explores how Voluntary Agency Network of Korea (VANK), a Korean NGO, conducts public diplomacy and nation branding of Korea based on its members' relationships with foreigners. To gain an in-depth understanding of VANK's activities from the perspectives of public diplomacy and nation branding, this study follows an exploratory single case study method. The findings of this article suggest how VANK and similar non-state actors offer potential for public diplomacy and nation branding that can be utilized also by state agencies.

**Key Words:** public diplomacy, nation branding, cyber public diplomacy, non-state actors, relationship management

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## I. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The role of non-state actors in public diplomacy remains an unsettled question in the literature. A review of SCOPUS-indexed articles and books on public diplomacy finds that 59% have a state-centric definition of public diplomacy while 41% accept non-state actors as actors in it, although clear boundaries are often not drawn (Ayhan in press). This article explores how a non-state actor might be relevant to the public diplomacy and nation branding of a country without government direction.

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The Voluntary Agency Network of Korea (VANK) is a Korean non-governmental organization (NGO) that mobilizes and empowers young Korean enthusiasts to promote Korea to foreigners. VANK calls itself a "cyber-diplomatic organization" (VANK 2012a) and claims a stake in Korea's public diplomacy and nation branding as a societal actor. VANK is engaged in three main activities. First, at the center of all VANK activities lies the relationship building of its members with foreigners using social networking sites (SNS), hence the "cyber." VANK aims to brand Korea as "my friend's country," based on relationship building and management. Second, VANK finds and corrects mistakes about Korea found on foreign websites and books (see Lim 2010). This is also done at the grassroots level by VANK's members. Third, VANK aims to raise awareness about global problems and the history and culture of foreign countries among its middle and high school student members (see Park and Kim 2017). This article is particularly interested in VANK's public diplomacy and nation branding activities based on the building and management of relationships with foreigners among its members. The importance of its other activities for Korea's public diplomacy and nation branding can be examined in future research.

This article posits that non-state actors such as VANK can also use public diplomacy as an instrument. However, empirical studies of how non-state actors conduct public diplomacy are very scarce. Fitzpatrick (2012, 437) has called for empirical research which "is needed to explain how public diplomacy does, can and should work in a networked world." Furthermore, Gilboa (2008, 57) has suggested that there should be more research on the public diplomacy initiatives of states other than the United States and of non-state actors.

This article responds to these two calls by conducting an empirical study of a Korean NGO's public diplomacy activities. This article explores how VANK conducts public diplomacy and nation branding of Korea based on its members' building and management of relationships with foreigners and the strategies and best practices of VANK's public diplomacy activities, particularly those that aim to brand Korea as "my friend's country."

This article conveys the implicit theoretical framework underlying VANK's public diplomacy and nation branding efforts to both academia and practitioners. VANK's entrepreneurship in this endeavor can be benchmarked by other grassroot organizations

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1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at International Communication Association post-conference on "Bridging Practice and Disciplinary Perspectives on the Formation and Effects of Country Image, Reputation, Brand, and Identity" in San Diego on 30 May 2017.

or governmental public diplomacy agencies who want to utilize citizens' relationships with foreigners for public diplomacy and nation branding.<sup>2</sup>

The analytical framework is built in the next section; it conceptualizes public diplomacy, nation branding, cyber public diplomacy and relationship building and management's place in these concepts. The third section examines VANK in detail and gives the methodological approaches of the article. The fourth section analyzes VANK's public diplomacy and nation branding activities based on the analytical framework. The fifth section explores the strategies and best practices of VANK's public diplomacy and nation branding based on relationship building and management. The last section summarizes the findings and suggests theoretical and practical implications.

## **II. Analytical Framework**

### ***A. Public Diplomacy***

There are various ideas of what public diplomacy aims to achieve. Fisher and Bröckerhoff (2008, 3) address this boldly: "whatever you call it, we're in the influence business." Traditionally, public diplomacy is defined as "efforts by the government of one nation to influence public or elite opinion in a second nation for the purpose of turning the foreign policy of the target nation to advantage" (Manheim 1994, 132). Recent definitions, also referred to as "new public diplomacy" (Melissen 2005), accommodate new actors and a greater variety of objectives, strategies, and instruments for public diplomacy. Public diplomacy has been more recently defined as "an instrument used by states, associations of states, and some sub-state agencies and non-state actors to understand cultures, attitudes and behavior; to build and manage relationships; and to influence thoughts and mobilize actions to advance their interests and values" (Gregory 2008b, 276). This article uses Gregory's definition, with some modifications suggested below.

State agencies and non-state actors who employ public diplomacy as a tool work to influence foreign publics, change attitudes, and, going one step further, behaviors.

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2. Indeed, VANK's Director Gi-Tae Park hopes that people in less-developed countries who have not had the chance to frame worldwide discussions of their countries can benchmark VANK and have a stake in their country's nation branding (personal interview, 11 November 2014).

A more normative and ethical understanding of public diplomacy, mainly based on widely accepted public relations theories such as Excellence Theory (Grunig and Hunt, 1984), relationship management theory (Ledingham 2003), and dialogic theories (Kent and Taylor 2002; Fitzpatrick 2011, 15-18), also suggest the readiness of the self to change its own attitudes and behaviors, widening its horizon after encountering the other (Gangadean and Swidler 2000; Saunders 2013).

Furthermore, it is expected that these changes of attitude and behavior on the societal level facilitate mutual understanding and collaboration, which translate into more beneficial social and economic interactions between the societies involved. If the goals of public diplomacy are more ambitious, the expectation may move one step further to changes of attitudes and behavior on the societal level being reflected in the attitudinal and behavioral changes in the official policies on the state level of the other country; leading, ideally, to a more peaceful environment for the self. The ultimate goal of public diplomacy in the latter case is achieving foreign policy changes in other countries to the advantage of the public diplomacy initiator (Malone 1985, 199; Zatepilina 2009, 1).

It is often argued in the literature that governments must collaborate with their domestic constituents to achieve more effective public diplomacy outcomes (Attias 2012; Cabral et al. 2014; Snow 2008). Copeland (2009, 102) has gone further, proposing that for effectiveness, public diplomacy should be moved "into much closer proximity to Main street (or thereabouts) by getting at the grassroots and taking diplomacy to the people." Gilboa (2008; see also Lee and Ayhan 2015) has suggested that the long-term goal of public diplomacy, relationship-building, should only be remotely related to governments and is better left to non-state actors, who are more credible to the foreign publics engaged.

The weakest claim incorporating non-state actors into a public diplomacy framework is to attribute them, intentional or unintentional, agency in the reputation and standing of their country-of-origin (Zatepilina 2009; Zatepilina-Monacell 2012). A stronger claim would be to attribute actorness in public diplomacy to non-state actors. Gregory (2008a, 245-46) argues that non-state actors' activities "to understand, engage and influence" global publics to advance their interests should not be named differently, while they are called public diplomacy when the initiator is the state.

Actorness in diplomacy and public diplomacy is a highly contested issue in the literature (Ayhan in press; Murray 2008). While state-centric perspectives regard the realm of public diplomacy as exclusive to state agencies (Golan 2015; McDowell 2008), some recent articles tend to define (public) diplomacy based on practices (Henders and Young

2016; Henrikson 2013; Kelley 2014; Scott-Smith 2014) or objectives (Gregory 2008b; La Porte 2012). Ayhan (in press) brings together the latter two approaches and argues that non-state actors can be regarded as actors in public diplomacy if they are institutionalized at least to some extent (La Porte 2012); the initiative has intentional (Gregory 2016; Scott-Smith 2008) and political (Hayden 2009; La Porte 2012) public diplomacy objectives that are connected to foreign policies (Byrne 2016; Cull 2013; Rasmussen 2010) for public interests rather than private interests (Castells 2008; Gregory 2016; Ronfeldt and Arquilla 2007); they employ communication with estranged publics (Der Derian 1987; see also Constantinou 1996) as a primary tool (Jönsson and Hall 2003; Rasmussen 2009). This article follows Gregory's definition of public diplomacy, cited above, and Ayhan's criteria for actorness in public diplomacy. Occasionally, the terms citizen diplomacy, people-to-people diplomacy, or grassroots public diplomacy are used interchangeably as subsets of public diplomacy and not as substitute terms, reflecting the nature of VANK's activities.

Even though state agencies' authority has partially shifted to associations of states, sub-state and non-state actors (Avant et al. 2010; Hocking 2004; Kelley 2014; Rosenau 1992), they are still central to diplomacy. However, systematic people-to-people exchanges also help link estranged societies through diplomacy-like activities. Kumamoto puts this elegantly (quoted in Mueller 2009, 106):

Istanbul has two congested suspension bridges that connect the two sides of the city across the Bosphorus Strait. There are, however, many small ferryboats rushing across the waterway bringing people together. The suspension bridges represent to me the formal ways our countries practice connecting [public diplomacy], while the ferryboats for me are the smaller personal ways of linking people to people [citizen diplomacy].

While Western cases of people-to-people diplomacy have been analyzed (see Hayden 2009; Payne 2009; Wiseman 2015), examination of non-Western examples are very rare (see Sevin and Salcigil White 2011). The case study of VANK's non-state public diplomacy will fill this gap in the literature.

## ***B. Nation Branding***

For the purposes of this article, nation branding is defined as a public diplomacy

tool aiming "to alter or change the behaviour, attitudes, identity or image of a nation in a positive way" (Gudjonsson 2005, 285). VANK's goal of branding Korea as "my friend's country" by encouraging Korean citizens to build genuine relationships with foreigners attempts to show the "human side of" (Sevin and Salcıgil White 2011, 87) the country. This emphasis on relationship building recalls Szondi's (2010, 342) contextualization of nation brands "as the manifestation of relationships that connect the communities from different nations who can mutually benefit from the relationship."

While nation branding is often conducted or directed by governments, non-state actors such as VANK occasionally claim their stake in branding their country, independent of the government. Complex images of a nation compete and are simultaneously negotiated in something like a marketplace of images. Societal actors may want to alter or strengthen certain images and identities about their nation either contrary to their government's nation branding strategies, because they are not content with the image their government is projecting; or in parallel with governmental efforts to supplement official strategies when they are content with those strategies. For example, some American-based international NGOs worked to project a different American image to the world during the Bush Administration (Zatepilina 2009; Zatepilina-Monacell 2012) demonstrating adversarial and competitive public diplomacy and nation branding strategies (see also Young 2012; Zaharna and Uysal 2016). On the other hand, VANK's efforts are often "supplementary" (Young 2012) to the Korean government's public diplomacy and nation branding strategies.

### ***C. Cyber Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding***

Recent developments in communication technologies have revolutionized how (public) diplomacy and (nation) branding are practiced. It is crucial for organizations to interactively engage their stakeholders through digital technologies that allow instant responses facilitating more symmetrical two-way communication, co-creation, and collaboration and hence more mutuality in understanding and influence. These developments have been studied under various names including digital (public) diplomacy (Bjola and Holmes 2015; Cull 2011; Manor 2016), public diplomacy 2.0 (Khatib et al. 2012), grassroots 2.0 (Payne et al. 2011), Web 2.0 diplomacy (Sevin and Salcıgil White 2011), and cyber diplomacy (Potter 2002) among others. This study uses the term cyber (public) diplomacy, since this is what VANK terms its activities.

VANK's most important resource is its highly technology literate young members

in one of the most wired countries in the world. VANK capitalizes on this advantage by doing almost everything online. VANK mobilizes the "passion of the youth (about their country) and promotes Korea ... via smartphones and internet" (Park 2012b, 73). Every member is urged to actively use SNS, which is "the cyber passport" (Park 2010b, 71). Educational programs are conducted online; promotional resources and guidelines are created and shared online; most importantly, relationships between the youth in Korea and in other countries are built and managed via interactive SNS that facilitate symmetrical two-way exchanges regardless of long distances.<sup>3</sup> For VANK's Director Gi-Tae Park, Web 2.0 is the "advance guard" of public diplomacy and nation branding (Park 2011b, 68). He argues that the "macro promotion era," i.e., state-centric promotion of a country, has passed, making room for the "micro promotion era," i.e., individuals' promotion of their country's image in the world (Park 2011b, 69). Web 2.0 makes this micro promotion possible with user-generated contents that empower the people, reducing the gap between them and professional diplomats (Park 2011b; Park 2012a). VANK's flexibility, timely responsiveness, and interactive engagement with and motivating of its young members gives it a "capacity-based authority" (Avant et al. 2010, 13-14) in cyber public diplomacy that government bureaucracies often lack (Manor 2016).

Nevertheless, relationship management through online platforms is not without its risks. Considering that most members of VANK and their friends are teenagers, the issue of privacy and security of online friendships requires more attention.<sup>4</sup> VANK warns its members against "African [sic] spammers" who use VANK's penpal platform (<http://chingu.prkorea.com>) to request money from users (VANK 2012b). Furthermore, members are asked to confirm the authenticity and personality of their online friends before deepening their exchanges. However, other privacy and security concerns are not seen as serious threats by VANK leadership, since "such dangers exist to the same degree in every kind of human interaction" (Gi-Tae Park, personal interview, 18 August 2017).

#### ***D. Relationship-building in Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding***

Recent literature on both public diplomacy and nation branding relies heavily on public relations theories. Fitzpatrick (2007, 205-8) asserts that public diplomacy's key goal is

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3. In the survey for this study, it was found that 88% of VANK member respondents and 95% of foreign respondents (their friends) use online means of communication most often.

4. I would like to thank Leysan Khakimova Storie for raising this issue.

"relationship management" and that relationships need to be "built on trust and accommodation created through genuine dialogue produced by two-way symmetrical communication that is designed to accommodate dual interests." Sustainable relationship building and management is an area where non-state actors are more prevalent than governments (Gilboa 2008; Lee and Ayhan 2015; Leonard et al. 2002; Nye 2004).

Advocates of new public diplomacy normatively suggest that foreign public should not be seen as passive target audiences who consume the targeted messages in a one-way manner, but they should be treated as active stakeholders who co-create meanings and brand identity (Fitzpatrick 2012; Szondi 2010). Sustainable and more vivid relationships can be built with these stakeholders when they are engaged interactively using two-way interpersonal communication rather than one-way mass communication (Fitzpatrick 2007; Grunig and Hunt 1984; Sevin and Salcıgil White 2011). Furthermore, studies of partnership, public relations and inter-group dialog all emphasize mutuality and symmetry in communication and exchanges to promote the sustainability of relationships (Brinkerhoff 2002; Cowan and Arsenault 2008; Grunig and Hunt 1984; Kent and Taylor 2002; Ledingham 2003; Nijhof et al. 2008).

Symmetry is understood as taking both sides' interests into account in a two-way communication process, allowing for possibility of mutual influence (Grunig and Hunt 1984). Mutuality is understood as the recognition of the interdependence of both sides with each other (Brinkerhoff 2002; Kent and Taylor 2002). Two additional aspects of sustainable relationship management are the two sides' having an equal status (no implicit or explicit power asymmetry) in their participation in the interactions (Allport 1954 quoted in Cowan and Arsenault 2008, 20) and having interpersonal behavioral relationships "grounded in actions and events" rather than mediated symbolic relationships (Grunig 1993, 136). Lastly, Szondi (2010, 342) argues that nation branding should also be "characterised by mutual understanding and dialogue where stakeholder engagement is of paramount importance" adopting relationship management "as the central concept."

Most scholars including those cited above, emphasize relationship building and management with key individuals who are influential multipliers in their societies. Other scholars advocate relationship building also at the grassroots level (Payne 2009; Payne et al. 2011; Sevin and Salcıgil White 2011). Payne et al. (2011, 48) argue that "grassroots public diplomacy efforts" are intended "to create a meaningful relationship that invites and establishes the needed personal grounding and connection." VANK's public diplomacy and nation branding initiatives are based on the relationship building and management



of young VANK members with their young foreign friends who are not influential individuals as such. The next section introduces VANK in more detail and gives the methodological approaches of this article.

### III. Case Study: VANK

VANK is an interesting, or "unusual" (Yin 2014, 69), case for non-state public diplomacy for three main reasons. First, unlike other NGOs, it claims to be "a cyber-diplomatic organization," whose members, from "elementary, middle or high school could become [diplomats] representing Korea," with the "right dream and vision," provided to them by VANK (VANK 2012a). Second, it has nearly 150 thousand members (Bo-Kyoung Kim, personal interview, 29 March 2017) demonstrating wide participation and hence participation-based legitimacy (Grant and Keohane, 2005). Third, it is approached by numerous Korean state agencies for collaboration in public diplomacy projects that confirm its capacity-based authority (Avant et al. 2010, 13-14; La Porte 2012).

This article follows an exploratory single case study method (Yin 2014). The case study methodology enabled an in-depth analysis of primary sources, namely, self-conducted structured interviews with VANK members that have been available on VANK's websites, the books, brochures and websites of VANK, and semi-structured interviews with the representatives of VANK, conducted by the author. Qualitative interviews with VANK representatives and members who are practitioners in the field facilitated the achievement of "depth and roundedness of understanding" in VANK's public diplomacy activities, "rather than a broad understanding of surface patterns" (Mason 2002, 65).

This is an "exploratory" study, because, first, the "existing knowledge base" for non-state public diplomacy is poor, with "no conceptual framework or hypotheses of note" (Yin 2014, 38). Second, the feasibility of more extensive research on NGOs' public diplomacy activities needs to be examined and this study formulates initial methods and frameworks to that end (Babbie 2010, 92). Third, this exploratory case study can help to yield new insights into the public diplomacy and nation branding activities of non-state actors, independent of government direction (Babbie 2010, 93).

VANK has more than a dozen websites and online boards where it shares its educational resources, best practices guidelines, and the best practices of individual members who are given such titles by VANK as *cyber diplomats* or *ambassadors*. One

of VANK's websites, [diplomat.prkorea.com](http://diplomat.prkorea.com), is dedicated to "cyber-diplomatic education." After each task that they complete, members upload a report to the relevant board, answering specific interview-style questions. Some of these reports are selected by VANK administration as *best writing*. In all, 112,166 such reports and interviews were uploaded to VANK's website between November 1999 and April 2017 (VANK 2017b; VANK 2017h). Of the interviews between March 2012 and April 2017, 20 *best writing* interviews were randomly selected regarding the task "promoting Korea to penpal" since this task is most related to public diplomacy and nation branding based on relationship building and management.

Furthermore, VANK has also nine different offline *ambassadorship education* programs and boards for each of these programs online at the website, [wearethe.prkorea.com](http://wearethe.prkorea.com), with the title "We are precisely Korean diplomats" (VANK 2017k). For each of these programs, VANK conducted interviews with the most successful members, who have completed all their assignments. There were one to five best practice cases for each of these programs, and all of them were selected.

The selected self-conducted structured interviews with the members pass the two tests that Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggest: completeness, which is fulfilled when "what you hear provides an overall sense of the meaning of a concept, theme, or process" (72); and saturation which is completed when "you gain confidence that you are learning little that is new from subsequent interview[s]" (73). The emerging themes in the interviews were coded using Microsoft Excel.

Last, two surveys were conducted to triangulate the qualitative data and confirm information available on VANK's primary sources. First, all VANK members who completed cyber-diplomatic education between March 2012 and June 2017 (N=2730) were sent an online survey in Korean which was prepared using the SurveyMonkey software ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)). 243 members participated in this survey between 2 and 13 August 2017. Hence, the response rate was 8.9%. Of these, 71 were deleted due to incompleteness, leaving 172 respondents. Second, the same VANK members were asked to forward an almost identical<sup>5</sup> online survey in English<sup>6</sup> to their foreign penpals. It is not known how many foreign friends received the survey, but 86 people participated. Of those responses, 14 were deleted due to incompleteness, leaving 72 respondents. Last,

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5. Each survey had some additional questions, but most of the questions had the same format and meaning.

6. Since VANK members often communicate in English with their penpals, the surveys for foreign penpals were prepared in English.

considering that VANK members and their friends communicate online, conducting the survey online did not cause bias. 56% of the Korean respondents have known their foreign penpal for more than a year, including 24% for more than three years. Similarly, 58% of the foreign respondents have known their Korean penpal for more than a year, including 28% for more than three years. The next section analyzes VANK's public diplomacy and nation branding activities based on the analytical framework.

#### **IV. VANK's Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding**

VANK's international advocacy of Korea started initially as a reaction to Korea's relatively weak standing in the international arena relative to Japan, which has led to Japan's claims to be more prominent than Korea's in the world (VANK 2017g; Park 2011c, 73). Japan was able to influence discourse internationally much earlier than Korea, including the language of maps, textbooks, and perceptions of Asia (Duvernay 2010; Lim 2010). Korea was a latecomer, trying to balance Japan's earlier framing. Due to this, citizens' voluntary work to supplement that of their government was regarded as vital. VANK was founded against this background to help create a local public good, namely saving the pride of the Koreans.

While continuing such political advocacy activities through letter campaigns to make changes to maps, websites and textbooks globally, the central purpose of VANK became branding Korea as "my friend's country" and making the world more Korea-friendly (VANK 2017i). This goal is VANK's *raison d'être* and lies at the center of its major campaign "PRKOREA 200 Thousand Project," setting out to educate 200 thousand "cyber diplomats" (Park 2010a, 101). The method to make Korea's image "my friend's country" is very straightforward: conducting "citizen diplomacy" which is a "concept that the individual citizen has the right, indeed, the responsibility to help shape [its country's] foreign relations, 'one handshake at a time'" (Mueller 2009, 102). VANK's vision is to "make every Korean a diplomat and every young Korean a public diplomacy ambassador" (Wang 2015; see also VANK 2015b) who promotes Korea to the world by building genuine relationships with foreign friends.

VANK's founder Director Park had the following dream, which came to be shared by some 150 thousand members:

Assume that [each] Korean will make five foreign friends. Then, 10 Koreans will be able to promote Korea to 50 foreigners. Later, the 50 foreign friends will talk about Korea to their friends. Korea will no longer be just a small country of 70 million people. If all Koreans become public diplomats, the 7 billion people of the world will become friends of Korea (VANK 2015b; see also Park 2016, 12-13; VANK 2017b).

Director Park argues that grassroots-based "citizen diplomacy activities" is more important than government-based official diplomatic activities (Park 2011a, 142; see also Park 2012a). He regards people-to-people diplomacy as a prerequisite for traditional diplomacy (Park 2011a, 143). In the interview, he talked about the limitations of using only official channels to promote the image of the home nation (personal interview, 11 November 2014). For him, VANK volunteers work as hard as diplomats or even harder to promote Korea overseas and their alternative approach to promotion of Korea plugs the gaps created by the limitations of state agencies. Elsewhere, Park (2011b, 67-68) asserts that "in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, government's one-sided promotion for nation branding cannot draw [domestic] citizens' affection and participation. There is a need for a campaign for which nonprofits, government, corporations and citizens unite to draw a pan-national public opinion and participation... Web 2.0 is the most important for promoting a nation brand."

Director Park's views echoes Castells' (2008, 91) bold argument that "public diplomacy is the diplomacy of the public, that is, the projection in international arena of the values of the public," and that public diplomacy is "a precondition for diplomacy." However, Director Park regards VANK's work as supplementary rather than as adversarial to Korea's official public diplomacy (c.f. Young 2012; Zaharna and Uysal 2016).

The idea of utilizing citizens as public diplomats is not unique to VANK. The Israeli government's "peer-to-peer diplomacy" programs aimed at educating, empowering and using Israeli citizens and the Jewish diaspora to show a friendlier, more tolerant and more diverse face of Israel to foreigners to remedy the "built-in disadvantage and an inherent weakness" of the Israeli government, using non-official diplomats "on the ground" who have more credibility (Attias 2012, 475). Other grassroots public diplomacy examples are usually built on forums or exchange programs that facilitate mutual understanding and dialogue between peoples of different backgrounds without an emphasis on education for the advocacy role (see e.g. Hayden 2009; Mueller 2009; The Center for Citizen Diplomacy 2017).

What distinguishes VANK's public diplomacy from other grassroots initiatives is that VANK does more than networking and facilitating exchanges as it actively empowers Korean citizens through education and its promotional materials to advocate Korea's interests. In that way, VANK's activities are more like the Israeli government's project, but the former is not initiated or directed by the government, is much larger in scale, and has a longer history than the latter.

VANK explains its "public diplomacy vision" in the following seven stage process (VANK 2017j): 1) the vision starts with a "seed" which is the friendship of a young Korean with a foreign peer; 2) the seed "takes roots" in the "vision" that Korea will enjoy good relations with the world as the "center of Asia and gateway of Northeast Asia" through VANK's "mission" of Koreans befriending foreigners and changing their perceptions of Korea; 3) the rooted seed "sprouts" as each VANK member receives training to become a "cyber diplomat;" 4) the sprouts become a tree and grow "branches," as members participate in various VANK activities and deepen their relationships with their foreign friends; 5) the branches grow "leaves," as all members' individual small activities aggregate and this process gives more motivation to all Koreans to participate and do their individual part in a bid to change Korea's perception in the world; 6) the tree grows and "birds nest" in it, as the people of the world comes to favor the leadership of Korea, a country "that shares goals and friendship with everybody in the world;" and 7) Korea becomes the "forest of hope," where the people of world shares dreams with as the image "my friend's country" gets strengthened.<sup>7</sup>

VANK's vision reflects the public diplomacy framework introduced in the Analytical Framework section. Small individual steps, building relationships with foreigners and promoting Korea to them, are expected to lead to attitude and behavioral changes in individual foreigners in favor of Korea, which collectively make the world a more Korea-friendly place.

While VANK considers itself a "cyber-diplomatic organization," the question whether VANK can be regarded as a public diplomacy actor still holds. It is easy to establish VANK's stake and agency in Korea's standing and reputation in the world (Zatepilina 2009), but actorness in public diplomacy is on a different level.

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7. Inspiration for this vision apparently comes from Matthew 13:31-32, which is quoted on the back cover of a book published by VANK (Lim 2010): "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a man planted in his field. Although it is the smallest of all seeds, yet it grows into the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches."

Korea enacted the Public Diplomacy Act in 2016, the main purpose of which is to improve Korea's "image and prestige in the international community" (*Gonggong Waegyo Beob* 2016). The act defines public diplomacy as "diplomatic activities through which the State promotes foreign nationals' understanding of and enhance confidence in the Republic of Korea directly or in cooperation with local governments or the private sector based on culture, knowledge, policies, etc." (*Gonggong Waegyo Beob* 2016).

VANK's objectives are in line with the official public diplomacy objectives of Korea stated above, and hence with its foreign policy goals, although VANK's work to realize public diplomacy goals are not and do not have to be necessarily approved by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Korea. Going one step forward, based on the above discussion on VANK's public diplomacy, it can be argued that VANK is an independent public diplomacy actor. VANK has intentional public diplomacy objectives and activities that parallel Korea's official definition and the purpose of public diplomacy supplementing Korea's foreign policy goals; VANK members communicate with foreigners and it acts for the collective interests of Korean people, contributing to the generation of a public good.

On the other hand, VANK's legitimacy and accountability can be questioned. VANK is no exception to the four "voluntary failures" that Salamon (1987) list, which are insufficiency (limited scale and resources), amateurism, particularism (not interests of community at large) and paternalism (sponsor's visions and preferences). Neither has VANK been delegated by the Korean people to represent them as a diplomatic organization nor does it have the authority to "appoint" its members as "cyber diplomats" or "ambassadors." Therefore, VANK lacks what Grant and Keohane (2005) call the delegation model of accountability. The lack of elections and participation of the members in key decision-making processes create problems also for the participation model of accountability (Grant and Keohane 2005) for an NGO that claims to be a diplomatic organization. Therefore, it is more appropriate to regard VANK's stake and agency in Korea's nation branding and public diplomacy as representing a viewpoint; thus, the usefulness of VANK's activities is in its ideas and work rather than representing Korean civil society or Korean interests (Charnovitz 2007).

Furthermore, as stated above, VANK's activities are based on the active participation of tens of thousands of its members. It has accountability, at least to some extent, based on the participation model. VANK's claim to legitimacy and acting for the collective interests of the Korean population, although it is not delegated or approved by the Korean

public, would be based on the idea that they are "doers that gain legitimacy by" (Ebrahim 2003, 817) "getting the job done" (Henrikson 2013, 120) effectively. While VANK lacks "institution-based" or "delegation-based authority," it enjoys "capacity-based authority," which is "based on [its] perceived competence" (Avant et al. 2010, 13-14; see also Kelley 2014) and proven by the at least 15 active memoranda of understanding (MOUs) it has signed with state agencies (Park Gitae, personal interview, 30 March 2017; see also Han 2012).

VANK is a network of young individuals for which the VANK administration, consisting of only five people, acts as a hub serving its members and objectives mainly through three main functions: 1) as an educational hub, VANK creates contents and offers education programs for empowerment of individual members; 2) as an entrepreneurial leader, VANK mobilizes and motivates tens of thousands of Korean teenagers who are willing to become citizen diplomats; and 3) as a gatekeeper, the VANK administration builds and maintains relationships with partners and donors both from the public and private sectors. The first two of these functions which are crucial for VANK's public diplomacy and nation branding based on relationship building and management, are analyzed below.

### ***A. VANK as an Educational Hub***

VANK's Director Park (2011a, 144) argues that people-to-people diplomacy is very vital for any country, but there is no place where people can receive systematic education in people-to-people diplomacy in Korea. VANK tries to plug this gap by giving online and offline education for its members. It calls itself a cyber-diplomatic organization and its members diplomats. Just as official diplomats of any country go through training, VANK's members also go through its diplomatic education to earn their titles such as *ambassadors* practicing diplomacy of a kind.

Cyber-diplomatic education (the online education program of VANK) involves 12 stages of tasks that empower members to promote Korea to the world mainly through building relationships with foreign penpals (VANK 2015a). The tasks include:

- (Task 3) Making a foreign penpal and promoting Korea to him/her and his/her family, school, and work environment.
- (Task 4) Becoming an international expert: having dialogue with the world and

harmoniously promoting Korea.

- (Task 6) Finding errors related to Korea overseas (e.g. East Sea, Dokdo).
- (Task 7) Sending letters of complaint regarding errors related to Korea overseas (e.g. East Sea, Dokdo).

Between 2000 April and 2016 February, 31,506 people -mainly teenagers- registered for VANK's cyber-diplomatic education; 6,813 of them completed all of the tasks and were "appointed" as "cyber diplomats" (VANK 2016b). Many others completed some tasks but not all. For example, task number three, above, which is closely related to public diplomacy and nation branding based on relationship building and management, was completed by 11,796 people between 1999 November and 2017 April (VANK 2017h; VANK 2017b).

The offline "ambassadorship education" of VANK consists of a one-day workshop of lectures and best practice guidelines for effective citizen diplomacy, followed by a month given to complete the tasks. Between 2011 and 2016 September, 15,415 people participated in these offline education programs, and 3,287 were "appointed" *ambassadors* (VANK 2016a).

VANK's guidelines, which are easy to follow for students, are also used in middle and high schools for club activities. There have been 994 VANK clubs of which 101 are still active (Bo-Kyoung Kim, personal interview, 29 March 2017). Furthermore, in March 2017, the Ministry of Education added VANK's activities to its recommended activities list as part of the exam-free semester system (*jayuhakgijae*). VANK plans to send its 61-page manual to 450,000 middle school students and expects many of them to participate in this self-paced program and promote Korea to five foreigners each (Wang 2017).

VANK's goal of making the world a Korea-friendly place builds upon the activities of its thousands of individual members. Members' relationships with foreign friends and their promotion of Korea to them lies at the heart of VANK's mission. In sum, VANK serves as an educational hub empowering Korean youth to be effective citizen diplomats who promote Korea to foreigners by building genuine friendships with them to brand Korea as "my friend's country."

## ***B. VANK as an Entrepreneur***

As an entrepreneur, VANK mobilizes Korean youth, empowers and utilizes them as



citizen diplomats for the aim of branding Korea as "my friend's country." Empowerment and motivation occurs mainly through the three communication narratives that VANK uses: identity-based, social-based and task-based narratives (Zaharna 2013).

Director Park is aware of the potential of patriotic Korean youth who go to overseas every year for various reasons and actively use SNS (Wang 2014). VANK tries to channel and utilize this potential to promote Korea. In the interview, Park said that "Koreans have very strong pride, they are very proud of their country... They want these foreigners to have a good feeling about Korea and learn about their country too" (personal interview, 11 November 2014).

When asked to rank the reasons<sup>8</sup> why they promote Korea, most VANK members answered, "because I love Korea" (score: 3.96; ranked first by 43.75%) or "to correct misperceptions about Korea" (score: 3.87; ranked first by 32.50%). Other reasons listed were "to make foreign friends" (score: 3.13; ranked first by 12.50%), "to practice English" (score: 2.67; ranked first by 8.13%) and "other" (score: 1.38; ranked first by 3.13%).

Furthermore, members were asked what they had gained from their VANK experience: 55.63% answered that they gained a great deal "pride as a Korean" and 31.87% gained some pride. 37.5% obtained much "relationship-building with good friend(s)" and 43.13% obtained some degree of this. The answers "respect from people around me," "improving English," and "good experience for my CV" were less popular.

VANK's Korean identity-based narrative, which emphasizes the duties and responsibilities of every Korean citizen to be a public diplomat and promote Korea, is significant in attracting and retaining members (Zaharna 2013, 186). VANK is very successful at presenting its platform as an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991) of thousands of cyber diplomats, which in turn, motivates members to actively participate in the voluntary promotion of Korea.

The members' sense of belonging to VANK and "keeping together in time" (McNeill, 1995) with like-minded others adds a social-based narrative to this network (Zaharna 2013, 186). VANK's entrepreneurship and effective mobilization of members convinces individual members that they are not alone in promoting Korea and that their small efforts aggregate and can make a difference as "each contribution makes the next one more worthwhile and thus, more likely" (Marwell and Oliver 1993, 63).

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8. These options were created based on an analysis of the self-conducted interviews of members on VANK's websites and online boards.

In the interviews with the *best-practicing ambassadors*, one member says that "I was impressed when I realized that there are many students like me ... Only my effort as one person is also important, but when tens, hundreds and thousands of people's efforts are added up, I think we can get closer to the truth" (VANK 2017e). Another *best practicing ambassador* says that she is not sure how much that was new she learned in the two ambassador education programs she participated, but getting to know other members who share the same goals and dreams was a life-changing experience for her (VANK 2017c). A third *ambassador* also feels that VANK is a "great organization," which nurtures people like him "from seeds into big trees," all of them coming together and making a forest (VANK 2015c).

Lastly, the tasks given to the members add a task-based narrative to VANK's cyber-diplomatic network catalyzing the motivation of members and giving them concrete guidelines to practicing grassroots public diplomacy and nation branding (Zaharna 2013, 186). Upon the completion of online or offline education and their tasks, VANK members are given titles such as *cyber diplomat* or *ambassador* which satisfy their pride, patriotism, and giving them greater motivation to dedicate themselves to the mission of Korea's promotion. One of the *ambassadors* said that participation in VANK made him decide that he should take similar actions to reach his goal of being a history teacher (VANK 2015c).

In sum, VANK's entrepreneurship and communication narratives motivate Korean youth to participate in VANK's grassroots public diplomacy and nation branding efforts. If these efforts were not systematically guided by VANK, they would have been simply personal intercultural exchanges, if the exchanges took place at all. However, VANK's systematic approach to promoting Korea through relationship building and management with foreigners makes these endeavors perfect examples of non-state public diplomacy and nation branding. VANK's education (including missions and guidelines), resources and motivation lead its members to feel a sense of ownership in the agency of public diplomacy and nation branding of Korea. The guidelines and the best practices of VANK members' relationship management with foreign friends are analyzed in the next section.

## **V. Strategies and Best Practices of VANK's Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding**

VANK members must accomplish tasks according to the guidelines given by VANK.

As stated above, building and managing genuine friendships with foreigners lie at the center of all tasks. New VANK members learn how to best promote Korea to their friends while maintaining and deepening their friendships using VANK's best practices guidelines and interviews with *best ambassadors* or *best cyber diplomats*.

According to the VANK guidelines, the starting point of building a friendship with foreigners is getting rid of any prejudice against foreigners and being open-minded (Park 2010c; VANK 2017f, 1). Second, one must show sincere interest in the friend's country and study it, because this is the key to a "more intimate and deeper" friendship (VANK 2017f, 1; Park 2011a, 144; VANK 2015b). Thirdly, one must promote Korea to foreign friends, using photos naturally based on "daily personal experiences (e.g. recently attended Korean wedding ceremony)" followed by "Korean music and food" (VANK 2017f, 2-3).

Members are warned not to overemphasize Korea promotion. Director Park (2011a, 151; VANK 2017d) asserts that building friendship with foreigners is no different than building it with Koreans. Therefore, one must first try to build "humane intimacy" and listen to one's friend, not trying to promote Korea one-sidedly. Promoting Korea must follow the construction of intimate relations in a "calm and orderly way," while also learning about the friend's country (Park 2011a, 151-2). Director Park's second warning is that one must be honest about Korea and not exaggerate its positive sides while rejecting its negative sides (Park 2011a, 152), reflecting Murrow's classic words, "to be persuasive we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible; to be credible we must be truthful" (quoted in Waller 2007, 158). Another warning is to use "humor and wit" and not to be exclusively serious because of "one's sense of duty in promoting Korea" (Park 2011a, 152-53).

Furthermore, interviews with *best ambassadors* or *best cyber diplomats* confirm the best practices suggested in the guidelines. This shows both that VANK's guidelines create a learning effect helping the members to build more effective relationships and that the members' practices on the ground are in line with these suggested guidelines.

One theme occurs almost in every one of the self-conducted interviews with the members of VANK. When they are asked for their "secret method for promoting Korea," they respond that one should not overemphasize the promotion of Korea (VANK 2017c). Along the same lines, most members also suggest the importance of genuine friendships which should create the basis for the promotion of Korea. One *best ambassador* says that rather than having the "heavy burden of promoting Korea," one should focus on promoting Korea through the process of mutual understanding about each other's cultures

"as friends" (VANK 2017c). In a similar vein, another member suggests that asking about and getting to know foreign friend's culture leads to the promotion of Korean culture in a very natural way (VANK 2017b, #617). One member also adds that learning about the friend's culture helps to better relationships, since one evades making mistakes due to cultural differences (VANK 2017b, #698).

Furthermore, another member reflects on her trial-and-error method and says that "with my greed to explain a lot about Korea, I asked my new friend some questions regarding her country. [Initially,] she answered my questions, but then she told me not to ask such questions. I realized then that rather than promoting Korea, I must first become friends" (VANK 2017b, #390). Similarly, another member recommends that one should first talk about interests and hobbies, and after becoming close friends, the VANK member can promote Korea based on the friend's interests without boring him or her (VANK 2017b, #406).

The surveys of both Korean VANK members and their foreign friends confirm that the exchanges between them were symmetrical. Each survey asked how often they discuss topics related to each other's countries with the following Likert scale options: never, rarely, occasionally and frequently. For both Korean VANK members and their foreign friends, the median answers were "occasionally" for "daily life," "Korean culture" and "my country's (or "my friend's country's" for Korean respondents) culture" and "rarely" for "Korean politics and/or international relations" and "my country's (or "my friend's country's" for Korean respondents) politics and/or international relations." Both sides confirmed that they spend as much time talking about the friends' country as talking about Korea.

Another theme that recurred in the self-conducted interviews with some members, which also repeats VANK's guidelines, is the use of photos and videos to promote Korea rather than words alone. A member suggests that when promoting Korea, it is more effective to start with topics that the friend is interested in and to use related images, videos and other visual materials (VANK 2017b, #598). This is more easily done when the interactions take place via SNS.

VANK's guidelines and the best practices of the members are not based on theoretical approaches, but rather on practice and trial-and-error. However, when they are analyzed in-depth, one can see that these strategies and best practices are in line with the relational approaches to public diplomacy and nation branding which are based on normative theories of public relations (Fitzpatrick 2007; Grunig 1993; Grunig and Hunt 1984;

Ledingham 2003; Szondi 2010). VANK's guidelines ask members to take into account the interests of foreign friends fostering mutual understanding and two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig and Hunt 1984); have genuine dialogue with empathy and mutuality (Kent and Taylor 2002; Fitzpatrick 2011, 15-18); emphasize behavioral, i.e., grounded in intimate friendship, rather than merely symbolic relationships (Grunig 1993); and have effective contact, as members "have equal status" with their peers (Allport 1954 quoted in Cowan and Arsenault 2008, 20).

If VANK's activities to promote Korea were practiced by Korean diplomats in the same way, all this could be regarded as government propaganda. However, when teenagers promote Korea to their penpals in a natural and friendly way while also learning about the friend's country, it is less likely to be seen with skepticism. A Chinese participant of VANK<sup>9</sup> says that "Director Park and the VANK youth are neither diplomats nor politicians, but I was moved by how diligently they promote Korea... I also wanted to learn [from them] and promote China to the world" (VANK 2017a; see also Wang 2016).

VANK's aim to create an image of Korea as "my friend's country" builds on this premise of genuine friendship and trust that comes with it. VANK's objective is in line with the normative "fundamental objective" of grassroots public diplomacy which "is to create a meaningful relationship that invites and establishes the needed personal grounding and connection from which trust—an essential requisite for credibility—emanates" (Payne et al. 2011, 48).

To confirm whether VANK's nation branding of Korea as "my friend's country" has borne any fruit, foreign penpals were asked to rank Korea's images to them in the survey. The results supported the hypothesis that VANK has been successful in achieving branding Korea as "my friend's country;" this phrase was the most popular answer (score: 5.27; ranked first by 34.62%). It was followed by "a country with attractive popular culture" (score: 5.25; ranked first by 25%), "a country with attractive traditional culture" (score: 4.90; ranked first by 19.23%), "a country good for tourism" (score: 3.67; ranked first by 5.77%), "a country with great companies" (score: 3.21; ranked first by 9.62%), "a country good for university education" (score: 2.92; ranked first by 1.92%) and a country under the threat of war (score: 2.77; ranked first by 3.85%).

Although the countries of the friends of VANK members differ significantly, ranging

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9. Although most of VANK's active members are Koreans, there are some non-Korean members who are interested in Korea.

from United States to China, VANK members were also asked to rank their friends' countries image. The most popular answer was also "my friend's country" by far (score:5.77; ranked first by 52.44%). This result also suggests symmetry of genuine friendship or relationship-building in VANK's nation branding.

## **VI. Conclusion and Implications**

This article has explored how a Korean NGO, VANK, practices public diplomacy and nation branding based on relationship building and management with the aim of making Korea's image "my friend's country." It was found that the vision and strategies of VANK's public diplomacy, which are based on practice rather than on theory, are in line with the public diplomacy and nation branding framework suggested at the beginning of the article. VANK educates, empowers, and motivates Korean youth to voluntarily take part in its public diplomacy and nation branding campaign. Surveys of VANK members and their friends confirmed two-way symmetrical communication in practice and that foreign friends see Korea as "my friend's country."

There are theoretical and practical implications of this explorative case study, which can be analytically generalized (Yin 2014) to other similar non-state public diplomacy actors. On the theoretical side, this article has shown that non-state actors can practice public diplomacy and nation branding independent of state agencies' direction; non-state actors can create added value to supplement official public diplomacy efforts of state agencies; non-state actors can catalyze building and managing genuine relationships which matter for public diplomacy in the long-run; and normative calls for two-way symmetrical communication are found to be practiced in the field and regarded as best practices for effective public diplomacy and nation branding.

On the practical side, it was found that there are many citizens who are willing to voluntarily offer their services to aid the public diplomacy of their countries, but entrepreneurship is required to realize this potential. Furthermore, this entrepreneurship does not have to come from state agencies, which might lack resources, time, innovation or leadership skills. VANK exemplifies how grassroots diplomacy can be taught through education programs and narratives to keep up the motivation of citizens to participate. Despite their apparent comparative advantages VANK-like NGOs, suffer from lack of legitimacy and accountability. They only represent a viewpoint through their activities

and work, rather than being delegated to the role of public diplomats to represent the national interests.

This article conveys the implicit theoretical framework underlying VANK's public diplomacy and nation branding to both academia and practitioners. VANK's public diplomacy and nation branding strategies can be benchmarked by other grassroots organizations or even governmental public diplomacy agencies who want to utilize their citizens' relationships with foreigners for nation branding and public diplomacy. VANK's education programs, online platforms and identity-based, social-based and task-based narratives (Zaharna 2013, 186) can guide similar grassroots public diplomacy and nation branding campaigns. VANK's experiences can empower NGOs or other social actors who initiate similar campaigns. Another significant aspect of this article is that it analyzed VANK's Korean documents and provided non-Korean speakers with their contents.

This explorative case study has yielded new insights into public diplomacy and nation branding of non-state actors. Future studies can accumulate on the findings of this study and examine the impact of VANK members' promotion of Korea through relationship management with foreigners on the attitude and behavior change of the latter. The symmetry of the exchanges can be analyzed in more depth. Furthermore, the positive and negative impact of letter campaigns can be studied to see whether this one-way nation branding effort contributes to VANK's overall public diplomacy vision or only satisfies Koreans' pride. Lastly, how state agencies collaborate with an NGO conducting public diplomacy for Korea can be explored to understand the dynamics of government-nonprofit partnership in this realm.

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