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Determinants of Global Korea Scholarship students' word-of-mouth about Korea

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Abstract

International student-mobility programs are one of the core programs countries employ as part of their public diplomacy portfolio. Policymakers assume that sponsored foreign students would develop positive beliefs about and emotions towards the host country, which in turn would lead to favorable behavior towards it. However, evaluations of such programs from a public diplomacy perspective are rare and Western-centric. In this paper, we analyze how Global Korea Scholarship students' cognitive and affective evaluations of Korea influence their country image and word-of-mouth about Korea; i.e., in how they voluntarily share their experiences in Korea with others. We use variance-based partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to analyze the data obtained from surveying 1107 scholarship holding foreign students. Our findings suggest that students evaluate Korea most positively in terms of its culture and nature, while their evaluations are not as positive in terms of the integrity and values of the country. For positive word-of-mouth, affection towards Korea plays the most significant role, while for negative word-of-mouth, the students' beliefs about the country's integrity and values had the most influence. Our findings help identify the strengths and weaknesses in Korea's country image which can, in turn, inform and shape policies accordingly.

Keywords Global Korea Scholarship · Student-mobility programs · Public diplomacy · Country image · Word-of-mouth · Outcome evaluation

Introduction

South Korea (hereafter Korea), like other countries, cares about having a positive image among foreign publics. The Korean Public Diplomacy Act sets the country's public-diplomacy goal as promoting "foreign nationals' understanding of and enhancing their confidence in the Republic of Korea" thereby "improving the Republic of Korea's image and prestige in the international community" (MOFA 2016; see also MOFA 2017, p. 3). The Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) program is seen as an integral part of Korea's public diplomacy policy (see e.g. MOFA 2017, p. 32). Along the same lines with Korean public diplomacy, the GKS program aims to improve Korea's global standing by "build[ing] a Korea-friendly network of young talents" (Chŏngwadae 2009, pp. 14–15).

Improving a country's image or status in the world can, in itself, be a worthy goal, but this is often instrumental in achieving other goals (Johnston 2001; Khong 2019; Wohlforth et al. 2018). In the GKS program's case, Korea aims to improve its country image among GKS recipients, with the expectation that they will become multipliers and eventually create favorable outcomes for Korea globally (Chŏngwadae 2009, p. 14; NIIED 2016, p. 14).

In this paper, we aim to analyze GKS students' country image of Korea and how this influences their word-of-mouth (WOM) about Korea, which is related to their expected multiplier role in Korea's public diplomacy. Specifically, we are interested in how and whether various dimensions of country image can determine students' WOM about Korea. By doing so, we would be addressing a gap in the assessment of student-mobility programs from a public diplomacy perspective, particularly in a non-Western context.

In the next section, we explain our analytical framework and conceptualize public diplomacy, country image and WOM, particularly in relation to the GKS program and Korean public diplomacy. Section three introduces our

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methodology. In section four, we share our findings. In the last section, we discuss these findings and our contributions to the literature and the practice of public diplomacy along with policy implications for the Korean government.

Analytical framework

Public diplomacy

Public diplomacy, both as a policy tool and an analytical concept, has been evolving over the last six decades. In essence, the term public diplomacy describes the communication-based activities international or transnational actors undertake in order to understand, inform and influence foreign publics and facilitate relationship management between domestic and foreign publics to achieve foreign-policy goals (Ayhan 2019; Cull 2013; Gregory 2008; Pamment 2018; Sevin 2017).

Public diplomacy functions in different ways to help achieve foreign-policy goals. One of the pathways in which public diplomacy works is by organizing communication-based activities, such as cultural events, student-mobility programs and international broadcasting, to generate favorable beliefs and attitudes towards the host country (Nye 2004; Sevin 2015; 2017). While favorable public opinion is used as a proxy measure when assessing public-diplomacy outcomes, it is not enough to form the basis of a summative evaluation of public diplomacy. An important question is whether beliefs about and emotions towards a country translate into behavior that is in line with the expected outcomes of a public-diplomacy program.

Student-mobility programs are one of the core programs countries employ as part of their public-diplomacy portfolio. Through student-mobility programs, such as the GKS, first-hand and direct experiences in the host country and with its people can provide foreign students with more informed perceptions and a more complex and deeper understanding of the host country (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs 1973 quoted in Scott-Smith 2008, p. 175). It is not realistic to expect that students would only develop positive attitudes towards the host country. Indeed, sometimes direct experiences in a foreign country may create more negative sentiments (Stangor et al. 1996; Yun and Vibber 2012). Either way, exchanges help "complexify" participants' thinking with a more "sophisticated idea" of the host country (Joseph Nye quoted in Leonard et al. 2002, p. 19; see also Snow 2009, p. 236).

Country image

In this paper, country image refers to a sum of perceptions that people have about a country based on their individual cognitive and affective assessments which, in turn, help decision making (Ajzen 2011; Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015a; Jaffe and Nebenzahl 2006; Kotler and Gertner 2002; Kotler et al. 1993; Nadeau and Olafsen 2015; White et al. 2019). Some public-relations scholars, particularly Grunig and his colleagues, prefer the term *relationships* over *country image* due to the latter term's lack of substance (Grunig 1993). These researchers refer to direct experiences with a country as experiential or behavioral relationships, and cognitive and affective evaluations based on mediated communication as reputational or symbolic relationships (Grunig 1993; Grunig and Hung-Baesecke 2015; Tam et al. 2018). However, relationships are social and are built and maintained by and between people who have agency, sometimes on behalf of organizations, but these relationships are not directly developed with entities or countries unless in a metaphorical sense (Ayhan 2020). Even if this argument is relaxed to treat organizations as 'as if' persons, only their intentional and purposive relationship building and management activities could be regarded as relationships (Ayhan 2020).[1] We find the idea of there being relationships between individuals and countries to be artificial and lacking in the necessary two-sidedness for the term *relationship* to have substance beyond what the *term country image* already captures. Therefore, we prefer to use *country image* over *relationships with countries* in this context.

Previous studies found linkages between country image and people's decisions related to the country in question, for example, intentions to travel to (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015b; Choi and Cai 2016; Nadeau et al. 2008), intentions to buy the products of (Heslop et al. 2004; Ingenhoff et al. 2019), intentions to migrate to (Nadeau and Olafsen 2015), intentions to work in (Ingenhoff et al. 2019), intentions to invest in (Ingenhoff et al. 2019; Wee et al. 1993), intentions to study in (Ingenhoff et al. 2019; Srikatanyoo and Gnoth 2002), intentions to build and maintain relationships with the people of (Varpahovskis and Ayhan 2020; Yun 2014), or to recommend that others do one or more of these behaviors in relation to a foreign country (Ingenhoff et al. 2019; Yun 2014).

Ajzen and Fishbein's (1975; 1980) theory of reasoned action suggest that people's beliefs inform their attitudes, and in turn these attitudes determine their behavioral intention towards an object. In recent years, many scholars employed this theory to country image treating country as the object of reasoned action (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015a; Yun 2014). Buhmann and Ingenhoff (2015a; b) operationalized country image through constructing 4D Model

[1] For a similar argument on "the state as person," see Wendt (2004).

of the Country Image, using a cognitive component and an affective component. The cognitive component (beliefs) was divided into three dimensions; namely functional, normative, and aesthetic. The functional dimension measures "[s] pecific beliefs regarding the competencies and competitiveness of a country, its political and economic effectiveness and performance" (Buhmann 2016, p. 44). The normative dimension measures "[s]pecific beliefs regarding the integrity of a country, its norms and values" (Buhmann 2016, p. 44). The aesthetic dimension measures "specific beliefs regarding the aesthetic qualities and the beauty/ attractiveness of a country as a cultural and scenic place" (Buhmann 2016, p. 44). The affective component, which has only one emotional dimension, measures "[g]eneral feelings of affection and fascination for a country" (Buhmann 2016 p. 44).

According to the 4D Model, beliefs (the cognitive component) determine the behavioral conation (in this paper, WOM) both directly and indirectly by determining emotions (the affective component) which, in turn, affect behavioral conation (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015a). In this study, we employ the 4D model and its instruments. However, instead of using the behavioral conation, we use self-reported behavior because the former shows only intention, while the latter is a better indicator of the actual behavior.

Most studies on country image take a snapshot of a country's image by asking a sample of foreigners, who may or may not have had any experience and/or knowledge about that country, to evaluate that country's image (see e.g. Anholt and GfK Roper 2008; Mcclory et al. 2018; Ingenhoff et al. 2019). For the purposes of this study, we surveyed the GKS students, who are foreigners that had spent at least 10 months in Korea, after which they evaluated the country in a survey. Their evaluations of Korea were more informed due to their direct first-hand and behavioral experiences rather than having obtained mere impressions through symbolic communication (Choi et al. 2019; Tam and Kim 2019; Vibber and Kim 2019). In other words, the GKS recipients experienced "close, direct, experiential, and sociological" communication with Koreans during their long stays in the country, compared to other foreigners' "essentially distant, mediated and superficial" communications with Korea and Koreans through the culture media and international news (Yun and Kim 2008, p. 568). Yun and his colleagues refer to this phenomenon as sociological public diplomacy (Yun and Kim 2008; Yun and Toth 2009; Yun and Vibber 2012). Previous studies show that direct experiences increase the predictive power of attitudes on behaviors (Ajzen 2005, pp. 53, 64; Regan and Fazio 1977, p. 42). Therefore, we believe that our study provides a more informed representation of country image due to our respondents' direct experiences in the country.

We test whether the 4D Model works in the context of GKS students' country image of Korea. Our main contribution to this model is surveying foreigners who are sponsored students with direct experiences in the country. We hypothesize that cognitive and affective components of country image will positively influence positive WOM behavior; and negatively influence negative WOM behavior. However, the part where we analyze how each individual cognitive dimension influence affective component and the WOM behavior is only exploratory, given that there is no established theory regarding this relationship.

Word-of-mouth

Berger's (2016) suggested that word-of-mouth is the key factor for "things to catch on." In a similar vein, Heath and Heath (2007) found that stories of credible others make things stick. In a similar vein, the recommendations of significant others have been found to be determinants for consumer purchases (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006), visiting a country (Jalilvand et al. 2012), and choosing particular higher education institutes (Paswan and Ganesh 2009), among other behaviors.

One of the underlying premises in student-mobility programs is that students share their experiences with their networks, including their friends, families and significant others. These people are likely to pay attention to these students' experiences and they get to learn about the host country through the agency of the students whose substantial direct experiences make their views and recommendations credible within their networks (Kim and Ni 2011; Kim and Rhee 2011; Seo 2013; Vibber and Kim 2015; 2019). These students span boundaries between the home and host publics (Kim and Rhee 2011). Furthermore, in the age of online social networks, students can share their experiences beyond their immediate networks, online through blogs, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, messaging applications and other platforms. Public-diplomacy-program participants' abilities to affect their networks, including the individuals, communities, and institutions, and also the events that take place within these networks, through their communications about the host country, which is referred to as multiplier effect or opinion-leader model, is seen as one of the most significant justifications for spending taxpayers' money on foreigners (Ailes and Russell 2002; Ailes et al. 2005; Fullerton and Kendrick 2016, p. 181; Scott-Smith 2008; 2009; Wilson 2014, p. 176).

There is one more stage between students' direct experiences and the generation of the so-called multiplier effect. Kim and his colleagues refer to this stage as megaphoning, which refers to the voluntary sharing of information about an organization, event or experience with others, which can take either a negative or positive direction (Vibber and Kim 2019, 2015; Kim and Rhee 2011; Tam et al. 2018). While we refer to the same phenomenon, we prefer the term

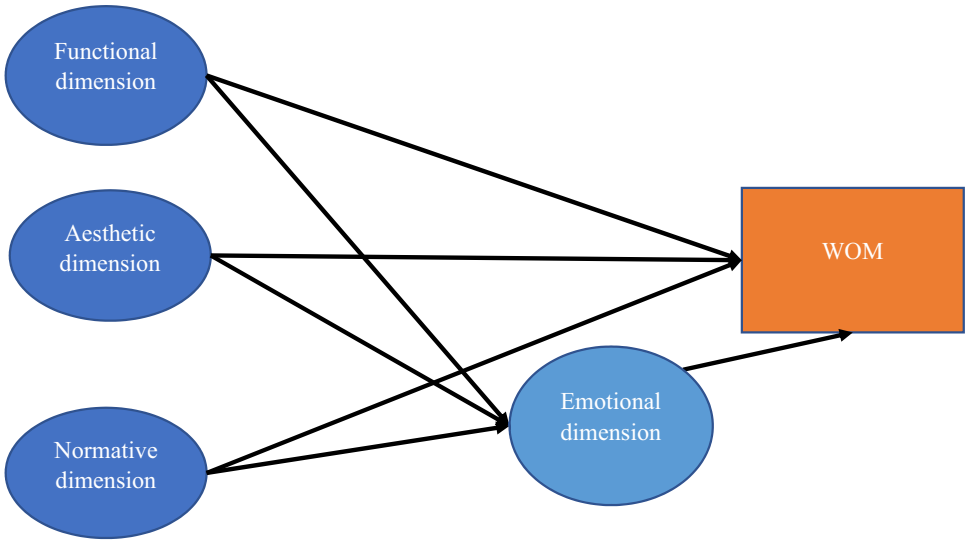

Fig. 1 4D Model of Country Image in Relation to WOM. Source: Adapted from Buhmann and Ingenhoff (2015a)

word-of-mouth (WOM) since it is more widely used in the literature. In this article, we focus on the determinants of this WOM phenomenon or, more specifically, whether country image can explain the WOM behavior. Figure 1 summarizes our model.

Fong and Burton (2006) show that people's word-of-mouth behaviors can be different online and offline. In a similar vein, Seo (2013) found differences between online and offline social relations in determining the evaluation of foreign countries. Therefore, we also measure both interpersonal WOM and WOM on social media to observe the differences between these two behaviors.

Methodology

Survey procedures

We surveyed GKS students for their cognitive (beliefs) and affective evaluations (emotions) of Korea. We conducted our survey using SurveyMonkey's online survey tool.[2] With the help of the Korean National Institute for International Education (NIIED), the survey was sent out on June 1, 2018, to a total of 2662 students, which was the entire population of GKS students at the time. Responses were received from 1561 students. After data cleaning, our sample size was 1107.

[2] One pilot survey and one focus group interview were conducted in February and March 2018 to improve the validity of the survey instruments.

Participants

Most of the survey respondents were females (61%). Around 25% of the respondents were enrolled in a Korean language school, 19% in an undergraduate program, 43% in a master's program, and 13% in a Ph.D. program. No nationality dominated the survey. Indonesians were the largest group, at 4.7%; followed by 3% from Vietnam; 2.6% from Russia; 2.6% from Brazil; and 2.5% from Bangladesh. The demographics of our survey respondents reflected the actual demographics of the GKS students (NIIED staff, personal communication).

Instrumentation

The questions on the cognitive and affective dimensions were adapted from Buhmann's (2016) 4D Model of the Country Image. The functional (16 items), normative (10 items) and aesthetic (7 items) dimensions were operationalized with the formative indicators because these are exogenous constructs, while the emotional dimension (4 items) was operationalized with the reflective indicators because this is an endogenous construct (Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer 2001; Ingenhoff et al. 2019, pp. 265–266). In other words, the formative indicators form or cause the formative construct (i.e. the cognitive dimensions), while the reflective indicators do not cause but only reflect what is being measured by it (i.e. the emotional dimension) (Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer 2001). Rather than looking for conation, we collected data about the students' actual behavior at the time of the survey. We asked four different questions concerning how often they shared positive/ negative experiences about Korea on social media/ face-to-face. Initially, we used these four dependent variables individually (face-to-face positive, face-to-face negative, social media

Table 1 Indicator loadings, Cronbach's α, composite reliability, AVE (Affective component)

Emotional dimension ($n = 1105$)		
Item	Loadings	t-values
I like South Korea	0.804	46.47
South Korea is an attractive country	0.852	52.506
South Korea is fascinating	0.799	37.702
If somebody speaks negatively about South Korea, it bothers me	0.733	29.582
Cronbach's α		0.873
Composite reliability		0.875
Average Variance Extracted		0.637

positive, and social media negative). Thereafter, based on the approaches we found in the literature (Ajzen 2005, pp. 78–83), we aggregated two positive WOM behaviors into a single dependent variable, *posWOM* and the same for two negative WOM behaviors, *negWOM*. Similar to the previous research (Ajzen 2005, pp. 78–83), multiple-act indices increased the explained variance. The question items for each construct are listed in Tables 1 and 2.

Analysis and model validation

We use variance-based partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to analyze the data in order to maximize the explained variance of the dependent variables.

Table 2 Correlation Coefficients between Indicators and Summary Items (Cognitive Component)

Functional dimension	
South Korea's economy is highly innovative and fit for the future	0.478***
South Korea produces very high quality goods and services	0.401***
South Korea has highly competent entrepreneurs	0.408***
South Korea is very wealthy	0.425***
South Korea is technologically highly advanced	0.388***
South Korea holds a strong position in the global economy	0.460***
The labor market in South Korea is equipped with highly competent people	0.455***
South Korea has a globally influential culture	0.293***
Athletes and sports teams from South Korea are internationally known for their success	0.329***
Competent officials govern South Korean politics	0.459***
South Korea has a very stable political system	0.448***
South Korea has a well-functioning infrastructure	0.423***
South Korea provides well-functioning welfare systems and pension plans	0.410***
South Korea is highly innovative in science and research	0.469***
South Korea provides great educational opportunities	0.453***
The level of education in South Korea is very high	0.465***
Normative dimension	
South Korea does a good job of protecting the environment	0.456***
South Korea is known for its strong commitment to social issues (e.g. development aid, civil rights)	0.609***
South Korea has high ethical standards	0.577***
South Korea is a socially responsible member of the international community	0.571***
South Korea respects the values of other nations and peoples	0.571***
South Korea takes responsibility for helping in international crises	0.511***
South Korea is a welcoming country	0.476***
South Korea has excellent civil rights	0.638***
South Korea has a very just welfare system	0.592***
South Korea acts very fairly in international politics	0.596***
Aesthetic dimension	
South Korea is home to beautiful cultural assets (e.g. arts, architecture, music, film etc.)	0.609***
South Korea has delicious foods and a wonderful cuisine	0.377***
South Korea has a very fascinating history	0.450***
South Korea has rich traditions	0.559***
South Korea has beautiful scenery	0.616***
South Korea has a lot of well-preserved nature	0.509***
South Korea has lots of charismatic people (e.g. in politics, sports, media etc.)	0.573***

SmartPLS 3 software was used to test the models. Following Lohmöller (2013, p. 42), we apply Consistent Partial Least Squares method with factor-based weighting scheme. We used 2000 bootstrapping for all of the calculations.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is carried out to validate the measurement model by evaluating the relationships between the constructs and their respective measurement items. A considerable body of literature confirm that PLS-SEM modeling is appropriate to use for CFA (Afthanorhan 2013; Hair 2017; Henseler et al. 2016). We apply the guidelines presented by Anderson and Gerbing (1991) and Tenenhaus et al. (2005) regarding conducting CFA in PLS-SEM setup. This technique has been used in a multitude of studies (see e.g. Chuang and Chiu 2017; Gefen and Straub 2005; Sheko and Braimllari 2018). Based on the CFA results, no item was deleted.

We validated the 4D Model of Country Image in several steps, following Buhmann and Ingenhoff's guidelines (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015b; Ingenhoff et al. 2019). We first looked at the p (<0.05) and t-values (>1.96) for the statistical significance of the influence of the independent variables on the dependent variables. We took into account the path coefficients only when the p and t-values suggested significance. The R^2 statistic gives information about a model's goodness of fit, as it measures how much the independent variables can explain the variance in the dependent variable. Chin (1998) suggests that if R^2 is higher than 19%, then the model has a weak explanatory power for the variance in the dependent variable; if R^2 is higher than 33%, then this has a moderate explanatory power, and if R^2 is higher than 67%, then this has substantial explanatory power. Q^2 is another important statistical parameter; it measures the model's goodness of prediction. While R^2 is used to indicate the explained variation, Q^2, indicates the predicated variation. Q^2 values larger than 0 suggest that the model has predictive relevance for a specific endogenous construct. In contrast, Q^2 values of 0 and below indicate a lack of predictive relevance (Garson 2016, p. 115).

We measured our model's goodness of fit using the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). This is defined as the standardized difference between the observed and predicted correlations. Hu and Bentler (1999) suggested that an SRMR value of 0 would indicate a perfect fit, while an SRMR of between 0.1 and 0.08 or lower indicates a good model fit.

In the next section, we analyze our findings beginning with the validation of our model based using the steps explained above.

Findings

PLS-SEM requires following a particular procedure to validate and evaluate the SEM model before adding the dependent variables (i.e., the social media and face-to-face WOM) to the model. In the following, we will show this procedure, step by step.

Evaluation of the reflective indicators

We begin by examining the emotional dimension, which uses reflective indicators. Table 1 presents the final measurement model's quality criteria for the emotional dimension. Items with loadings below 0.7 should be omitted so as to improve the model. As it can be seen, the loadings of all four emotional indicators are above the threshold and no omission is needed. All of the t-values are considerably high, as the critical value is ≤ 1.96. Thus, all of our indicators are highly significant for our model. The Cronbach's α is around 0.87, which is above the minimum required level of 0.7. The composite reliability value is also above 0.7 and is, therefore, satisfactory, as is the average variance extracted (AVE), with a value above 0.5.

Evaluation of formative indicators

The cognitive component includes three dimensions: functional, normative, and aesthetic, all of which use formative indicators. In order to evaluate the cognitive component, the external validity was examined by testing the formative indicators' correlation with the summary items. Table 2 presents the results of the external validity analysis. The formative items that are not significantly correlated should be removed. However, all of the items were highly correlated and significant, confirming the external validity of the constructs.

To assess the collinearity issues, we tested our items by using the variance inflation factor (VIF). If the VIF value of a formative item is ≥ 5, then this would imply the existence of collinearity issues. For our model, all of the values of all of the items are less than five, which means that there are no collinearity issues within the formative indicators. As for the outer weights, it is clear from Table 3 that all of our formative items are significant and have considerably high t-values. Therefore, no item was eliminated.

For the functional dimension, Table 3 shows that the item "South Korea's economy is highly innovative and fit for the future" has the strongest weight ($\beta = 0.110$). For the normative dimension, the items "South Korea has high ethical standards" and "South Korea is a welcoming country" ($\beta = 0.145$) have the strongest weights. Finally, for the aesthetic dimension, the item "South Korea has lots of charismatic people (e.g., in politics, sports, the media, etc.)" ($\beta = 0.236$) has the strongest weight.

Table 3 Final model: indicator weights of the formative measures

	Weight	t- values
Functional dimension		
South Korea's economy is highly innovative and fit for the future	0.110	27.885***
South Korea produces very high quality goods and services	0.096	23.534***
South Korea has highly competent entrepreneurs	0.104	26.005***
South Korea is very wealthy	0.094	24.116***
South Korea is technologically highly advanced	0.081	19.415***
South Korea holds a strong position in the global economy	0.100	26.642***
The labor market in South Korea is equipped with highly competent people	0.099	24.602***
South Korea has a globally influential culture	0.075	15.998***
Athletes and sports teams from South Korea are internationally known for their success	0.088	21.458***
Competent officials govern South Korean politics	0.093	22.593***
South Korea has a very stable political system	0.092	20.728***
South Korea has a well-functioning infrastructure	0.085	20.358***
South Korea provides well-functioning welfare systems and pension plans	0.095	24.575***
South Korea is highly innovative in science and research	0.102	25.578***
South Korea provides great educational opportunities	0.108	27.830***
The level of education in South Korea is very high	0.103	26.959***
Normative dimension		
South Korea does a good job of protecting the environment	0.128	28.059***
South Korea is known for its strong commitment to social issues (e.g. development aid, civil rights)	0.135	33.223***
South Korea has high ethical standards	0.145	33.624***
South Korea is a socially responsible member of the international community	0.138	32.424***
South Korea respects the values of other nations and peoples	0.143	34.397***
South Korea takes responsibility for helping in international crises	0.126	26.549***
South Korea is a welcoming country	0.145	30.845***
South Korea has excellent civil rights	0.138	34.664***
South Korea has a very just welfare system	0.133	28.690***
South Korea acts very fairly in international politics	0.126	26.875***
Aesthetic dimension		
South Korea is home to beautiful cultural assets (e.g. arts, architecture, music, film etc.)	0.207	25.416***
South Korea has delicious foods and a wonderful cuisine	0.158	16.325***
South Korea has a very fascinating history	0.189	20.326***
South Korea has rich traditions	0.203	27.913***
South Korea has beautiful scenery	0.202	23.361***
South Korea has a lot of well-preserved nature	0.186	23.527***
South Korea has lots of charismatic people (e.g. in politics, sports, media etc.)	0.236	25.439***

Table 4 Final model: PLS-SEM assessment

Effects	Path coefficients	t- values	S. D
Functional dimension → emotional dimension	0.177***	3.902	0.045
Normative dimension → emotional dimension	0.314***	7.159	0.044
Aesthetic dimension → emotional dimension	0.41***	11.63	0.035

***$p < 0.01$

The structural model evaluation: The 4D Model of Country Image

We now turn to the inner measurement model. Here, we analyze the path coefficients and their respective significance. Table 4 shows that all of the dimensions in the cognitive component (i.e., the functional, normative and aesthetic dimensions) has a highly significant positive impact on the affective component (i.e., the emotional dimension). Each cognitive dimension captures a different aspect of the

Table 5 Variance inflation factors (VIFs)

Functional dimension	Normative dimension	Aesthetic dimension
2.915	2.735	1.822

students' beliefs about Korea. The t-values show that the cognitive dimensions significantly contribute to explaining the affective dimension as they are all considerably above the critical value of 1.96. The aesthetic dimension (β = 0.41) has the highest and most significant effect on the emotional dimension, followed by the normative dimension (β = 0.314) and the functional dimension (β = 0.177).

Regarding the variance inflation factor (VIF), it is clear from Table 5 that all of the VIF values are below the critical value of 5; thus, there are no collinearity issues in our model.

The variance in the cognitive dimensions explains 63.7% of the variance in the emotional dimension which, according to Chin (1998), has a substantial explanatory power for R2. The Q2 value is 0.4, suggesting that the model has substantial predictive relevance.

The SRMR is used as an index for the overall goodness of fit for the PLS-SEM. Our model's SRMR value is 0.044, which shows a good model fit.

Descriptive results for WOM

Our findings show that when students are sharing both positive and negative experiences, they share these experiences more face-to-face than through social media (see Table 6). There is also a moderate correlation between negative and positive WOM on social media, suggesting that the same students who are active on social media share both negative and positive experiences (see Table 7).

Furthermore, students are inclined to share positive experiences more than negative ones. This finding is in line with the psychology of social media use, where individuals tend to share more positive than negative content about themselves (Newman et al. 2011). Table 6 summarizes these descriptive results.

Explaining WOM with the 4D Model of Country Image

The 4D Model of Country Image has explanatory power for students' WOM about their experiences in Korea. In the case of individual WOM behavior items, the 4D Model explains the foreign public's face-to-face WOM about their positive (20.8%) and negative experiences (18.6%) compared to their social media WOM about their positive (16.4%) and negative (4.3%) experiences (see Figs. 2, 3, 45). In all models, the aesthetic dimension significantly and strongly affects the emotional dimension, with path coefficients of no less than 0.41. The normative and functional dimensions significantly affect the emotional dimension in all of the models, albeit with lesser strength. The path coefficient from the normative to the emotional dimensions is no less than 0.3 in any model, while that between the functional to emotional dimensions reaches 0.17 in the positive face-to-face WOM model and decreases to 0.15 in the negative face-to-face WOM model.

Table 6 How often do…

	Always	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
You share your positive experiences in South Korea through social media	18.34% 203	32.70% 362	33.06% 336	9.58% 106	3.43% 38
You share your negative experiences in South Korea through social media	2.44% 27	3.43% 36	18.25% 202	27.73% 307	40.29% 446
You share your positive experiences in South Korea through face-to-face communication	27.10% 300	40.65% 450	26.38% 292	4.43% 49	0.99% 11
You share your negative experiences in South Korea through face-to-face communication	5.69% 63	15.99% 177	32.52% 360	26.65% 295	15.45% 171

Table 7 Correlation matrix for WOM behaviors

	Social media positive	Social media negative	Face-to-face positive	Face-to-face negative
Social media positive	1			
Social media negative	0.207811	1		
Face-to-face positive	0.433113	−0.01475	1	
Face-to-face negative	−0.04939	0.465538	0.101516	1

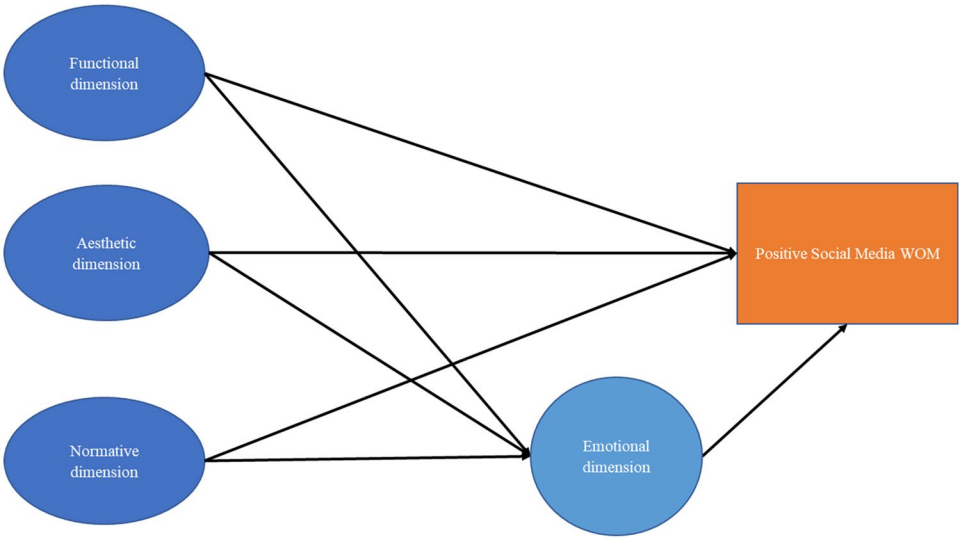

Fig. 2 4D Model of the Country Image Positive Social Media WOM

Path coefficients: *: p<0.1, **: p<0.05, ***: p<0.01
SRMR=0.044

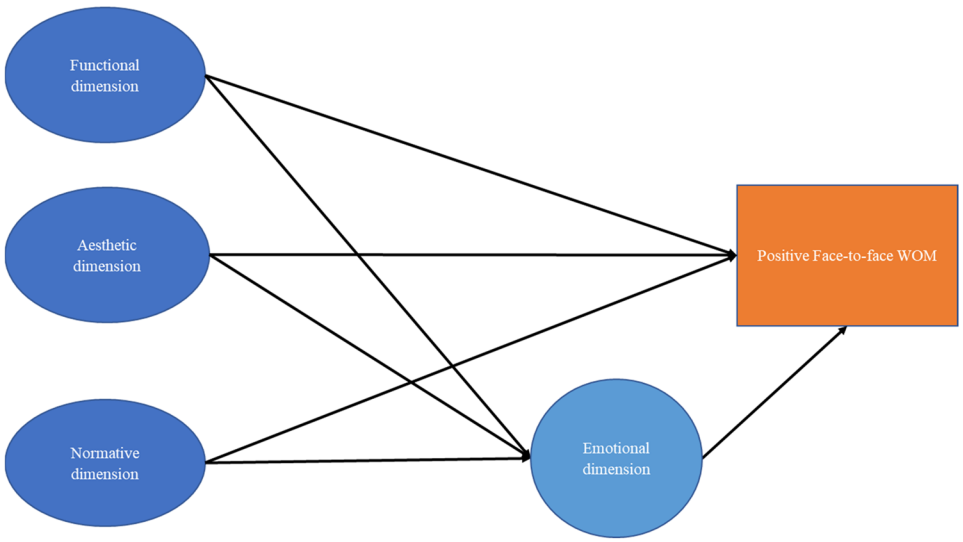

Fig. 3 4D Model of the Country Image Positive Face-to-face WOM

Path coefficients: *: p<0.1, **: p<0.05, ***: p<0.01
SRMR=0.045

Except for in the latter model, the emotional dimension significantly affects our explained behavior. Interestingly, as shown in Fig. 4, the path coefficient from the emotional dimension to the negative social media WOM is negative. This means that the more emotionally affected our respondents are by Korea, the less they will share their negative experiences on social media platforms. This relationship does not hold when it comes to sharing negative experiences in face-to-face setups as the path coefficient is not significant.

Regarding the direct effects of the cognitive component on WOM behavior, we find the aesthetic dimension to be significant in all models, except for positive face-to-face WOM. The normative dimension has a significantly negative effect in all models except for positive social media WOM, where it loses significance. In positive social media WOM, the path coefficient from the functional dimension to the WOM behavior is significant and positive. In the negative face-to-face WOM model, we find the path coefficient from the function dimension to the WOM behavior to be significant and negative. This result shows that when the GKS respondents positively evaluate the functional dimension of Korea's country image, they tend to share their negative experiences less in face-to-face setups. The R2 result shows

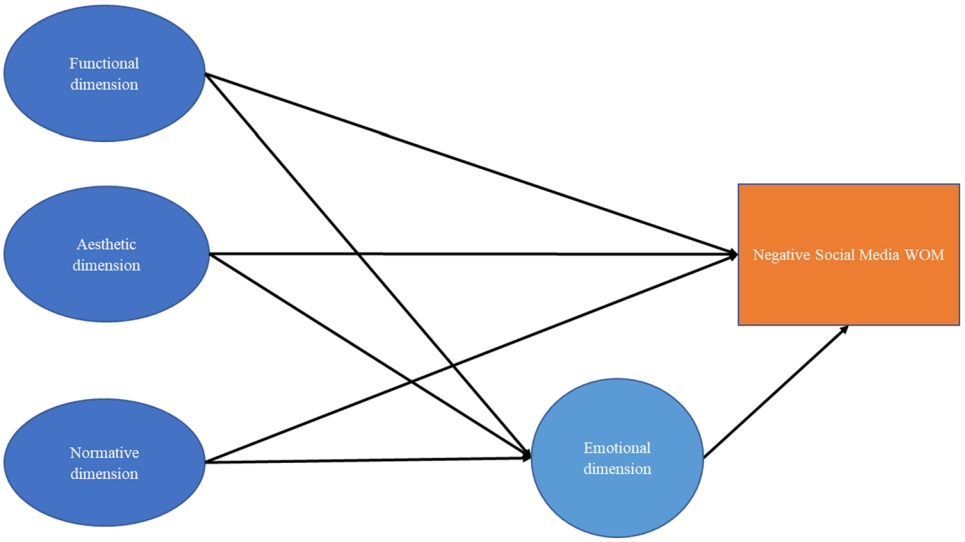

Fig. 4 4D Model of the Country Image Negative Social Media WOM

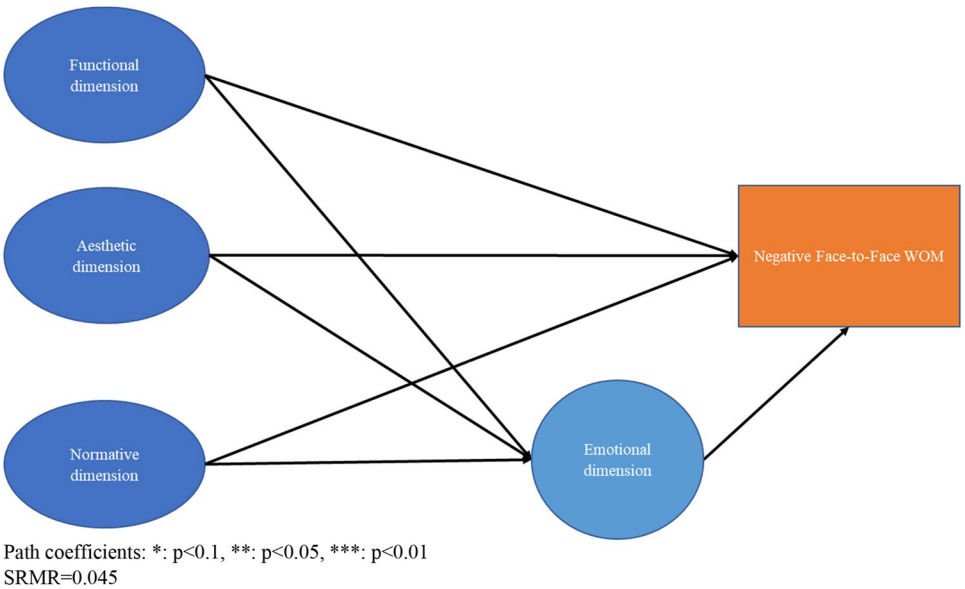

Fig. 5 4D Model of the Country Image Negative Face-to-Face WOM

that well over 64% of the emotional dimension is explained. In all of the models, the SRMR is around 0.044, which indicates a good model fit.

We aggregated two positive WOM behaviors into a single multiple-act index of *posWOM* and aggregated two negative WOM behaviors into a single multiple-act index of *negWOM*. Similar to the cases found in previous research (Ajzen 2005, pp. 78–83), the multiple-act indices increased the explained variance, especially for *posWOM*. The model explains 42% of the variance in *posWOM*, which has a moderate explanatory power, and 18.9% of the variance in *negWOM*, which suggests a weak explanatory power (see Figs. 6 and 7).

When we look at the path coefficients and the effect sizes, we see in Fig. 6 that the emotional dimension has the most significant and highest effect on *posWOM* ($\beta = 0.538$). This is expected because the emotional dimension has a direct influence on behavior and also acts as a mediator variable between the cognitive dimensions and the WOM. All of the other dimensions also have a significant influence on *posWOM*. The aesthetic and functional dimensions significantly influence *posWOM* in a positive way ($\beta = 0.155$; $\beta = 0.123$, respectively), while the normative dimension's influence is significant but in the opposite direction ($\beta = -0.143$).

The cognitive dimensions' influence on *posWOM* is even larger than these direct effects suggest due to the emotional

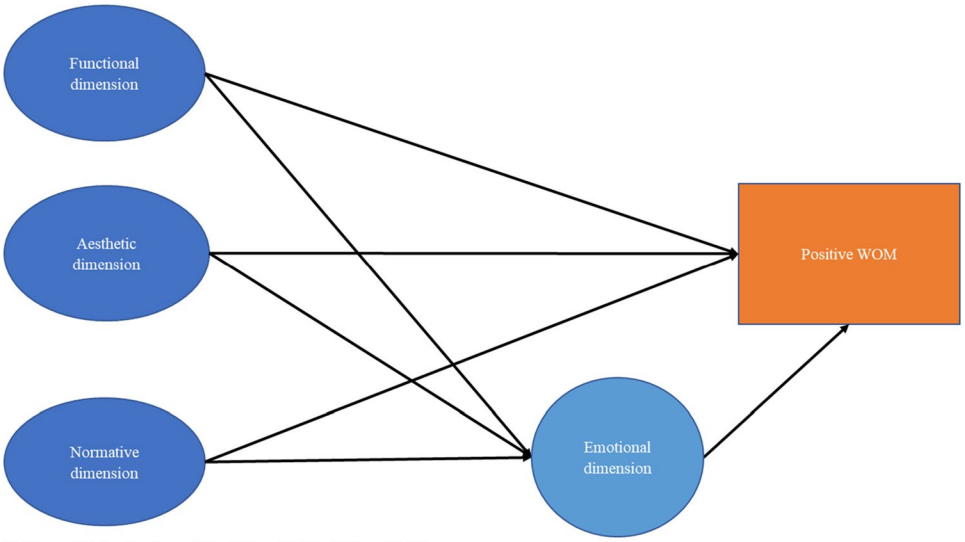

Fig. 6 4D Model of the Country Image *pos_mega*

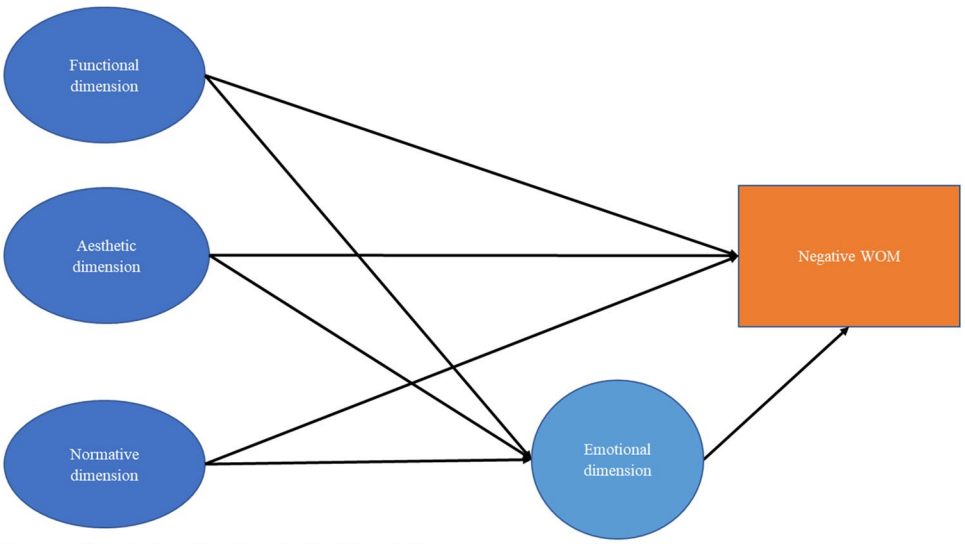

Fig. 7 4D Model of the Country Image *neg_mega*

dimension's mediation effect between the cognitive dimensions and *posWOM*. All three cognitive dimensions have very significant (at $p < 0.01$) indirect effects on *posWOM* through the mediation of the emotional dimension (aesthetic dimension emotional dimension *posWOM*: $\beta = 0.224$; functional dimension emotional dimension *posWOM*: $\beta = 0.095$; normative dimension emotional dimension *posWOM*: $\beta = 0.167$).

In the case of *negWOM* (Fig. 7), the normative dimension has the highest and most significant effect ($\beta = -0.35$). The emotional dimension also has a significant influence on *negWOM* ($\beta = -0.16$). While the influences of both the normative and emotional dimensions are negative on *negWOM*, the aesthetic dimension has a significant influence in the opposite direction ($\beta = 0.17$). The functional dimension's influence on *negWOM* is not significant. The aesthetic and normative dimensions also have significant indirect influences on *negWOM* through the mediation of the emotional variable but the path coefficients are rather small (aesthetic dimension emotional dimension *negWOM*: $\beta = -0.068$; normative dimension emotional dimension *negWOM*: $\beta = -0.05$).

An interesting finding is that the normative dimension has a significant positive influence on the emotional dimension ($\beta = 0.31$) and a significant positive indirect effect on *posWOM* (through the emotional dimension) ($\beta = 0.167$), but its direct path coefficient has a strong negative effect on

posWOM (β = −0.143). In the case of *negWOM*, the normative dimension has the highest and most significant effect (β = −0.35). Here, the direct effect is also negative, but this is expected given the negative nature of the behavior.

The aesthetic dimension also shows interesting findings. In the case of *negWOM*, except for the aesthetic dimension, all of the dimensions have negative path coefficients that influence the WOM behavior. The aesthetic dimension has the expected significant negative indirect effect on *negWOM* (double negative) through the mediation of the emotional dimension (β = −0.068). However, the direct path coefficient to *negWOM* is positive (β = 0.17). The aesthetic dimension's direct effect (β = 0.155) and indirect effect (β = 0.224) on *posWOM* were both positive, as expected.

There are two alternative explanations for the findings in the normative and aesthetic dimensions. First, in both dimensions, regardless of the WOM being positive or negative, the direction of the direct effect does not change in both cases. The direct effect of the normative dimension on both positive and negative WOM is negative, suggesting that the more these students share their negative and positive experiences, the more negatively they evaluate Korea in the normative dimension. The aesthetic dimension has a direct positive effect on both positive and negative WOM, suggesting that the more these students share their negative and positive experiences, the more positively they evaluate Korea in the aesthetic dimension.

The alternative explanation is that the aesthetic dimension is where students most positively evaluate Korea while the normative dimension is where students most negatively evaluate the country (the mean of the functional dimension is 5.61; the mean of normative dimension is 5.04; and the mean of the aesthetic dimension is 5.92). The aesthetic dimension has the expected positive direct effect on *posWOM*. The unexpected positive effect of the aesthetic dimension on *negWOM* suggests that students keep sharing their negative experiences despite evaluating Korea positively in the aesthetic dimension.

In a similar vein, the normative dimension has the expected negative direct effect on *negWOM*. The lower the GKS students evaluate Korea in terms of its integrity, norms and values, the more they will share their negative experiences about the country. The unexpected negative effect of the normative dimension on *posWOM* suggests that these students will keep sharing their positive experiences despite having evaluated Korea negatively in the normative dimension.

This explanation is supported by the indirect effects of these two dimensions. As mentioned above, the direction of the indirect effects of both the aesthetic and normative dimensions on WOM are as expected and differ from the direction of the direct effects. The normative dimension has a positive indirect effect on *posWOM* (β = 0.167), while the aesthetic dimension has a negative indirect effect on *negWOM* (β = −0.068).

Discussion and conclusion

The Korean government recently began to regard the GKS program as a public-diplomacy tool. The public-diplomacy implications of the scholarship program are limited to the widely accepted assumption that the program's students would become honorary ambassadors of Korea in their home countries (Ayhan et al. 2018; Chŏngwadae 2009, pp. 14–15; NIIED 2016, p. 14). Whether these assumptions hold and what needs to be improved for these public-diplomacy objectives to be realized requires an evaluation of the GKS program. We believe that the 4D Model of the Country Image can help Korean public-diplomacy policymakers by offering much-needed information on these students' cognitive and affective evaluations of the country's image. This information could help identify the Korean country image's strengths and weaknesses which can, in turn, inform and shape public diplomacy policies, including the GKS program, accordingly.

The policy implications indeed go beyond the GKS program. The students in the program are foreign publics who have direct experiences in Korea. Their experiences make their image of the country more informed which, in turn, provides them with credibility in the networks where they share their information about Korea. These findings can help public-diplomacy policymakers realize the weaknesses that require addressing not only at a communication level (e.g., nation branding campaigns, which is a symbolic component) but also at the policy level (e.g., improving foreign-friendly infrastructure for better direct experiences, which is a behavioral component). After all, making sure that students (and for that matter other foreigners living in Korea) share positive experiences with others depends on maximizing their positive experiences while minimizing their negative ones. While most of these students and other foreigners' daily experiences are beyond the government's control, some problems may be addressed by improving the students' environment at the university, in the language school, in their accommodations, in the immigration office, and so on. This, too, requires further assessments of the students' needs and the causes of their satisfactions and dissatisfactions.[3] Students' satisfactions and dissatisfactions in the country may, in turn, influence their WOM (Shafaei and Razak 2016).

[3] Our dataset has open-ended answers regarding students' reasons for their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their lives in Korea, but an in-depth analysis of these are beyond the scope of this paper.

Our results suggest that GKS students evaluate Korea most positively in the aesthetic dimension in terms of their beliefs about the country; however, these students' cognitive evaluations were not as positive in the normative dimension. For *posWOM* behavior, the emotional dimension played the most significant role, while for *negWOM* behavior, the normative dimension had the most influence. This finding supports conceptual works on soft power which argued that an actors' ability to get its preferred outcomes depends on three distinct currencies, namely competence, beauty, and benignity (Nye 2004; Vuving 2009). While from GKS students' perspective, Korea is very rich in beauty currency, which can be associated with the aesthetic dimension, and rich in competence currency, which can be associated with the functional dimension, but lacks to some extent in benignity currency, which can be associated with the normative dimension. This differentiation of soft power currencies was relatively overlooked in previous empirical works on Korean soft power (e.g. Hernandez 2018; Park et al. 2019).

The findings show that GKS students share their positive and negative experiences more in person than through social media. This is understandable given that not all students would actively use social media. While this finding is expected and we do not further explore it in this paper, there are implications for studies that track social media to understand certain stakeholders' views about a country. Some people may be wary about sharing personal information on social media because of privacy or security concerns and this acts as a behavioral control when it comes to WOM on social media (Ajzen 1991, 2002). It is possible that asking about WOM on social media or tracking social media to assess country image may give us a misleading story about a country's image due to behavioral controls that amount to self-censoring (Choi et al. 2019).

This study contributes to the literature on the intersection of public diplomacy, country image, WOM and student-mobility programs. The 4D Model was found to be valid for analyzing students' cognitive and affective evaluations of a country in which they have had direct experiences. The model also helped us assess the determinants of students' WOM about Korea.

This study fills in the gap in the literature on Korea's country image, which has been limited to public opinion only, by adding the behavior component to the assessment of public diplomacy outcomes. A limitation of the study is that we only examined the determinants of students' WOM, but future studies could analyze how important GKS students' WOM is in relation to other people's Korea-related behaviors, the so-called echoing effect (Vibber and Kim 2019; Tam et al. 2018).

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