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# How international students build a positive relationship with a hosting country: Examination of strategic public, message and channel of national public relations



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## ABSTRACT

Given the important role of interpersonal communication, this study explicates the antecedents of supportive intentions in the context of national public relations. The results demonstrate (a) international students' potentiality as a strategic public for a national PR, (b) food as a focal message to link them to Korean culture, (c) sanitation and cleanliness as specific contents to take care of, and more notably (d) social support as an enhancer and face-to-face interaction as an effective communication channel for shaping favorable behavioral intentions to revisit and recommend South Korea to family and friends in their home countries. Specifically among female students, social interaction appears to be the most influential factor in predicting positive word-of-mouth intentions directly and indirectly through their own experience, while male students primarily depend on their own experience of Korean food in forming supportive intentions.

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## 1. Introduction

It is crucial to shape and manage a nation's brand, as the good reputation of a nation can enhance its competitiveness in the global market. The growing importance of a nation's reputation for economic progress is rapidly driving nations to manage their image (Stock, 2009). In fact, a nation needs a brand management or public relations, the same as a company or its merchandize (Lee & Kim, 2008; O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2000; Stock, 2009). A national image-forming process takes three routes: organizational relations, text and personal contact (Moffitt, 1994). Various mass media vehicles and events and promotions operated by international and tourism organizations make people aware of a specific nation. Further, text is very useful for people who actively seek information and pay attention to in-depth knowledge.

Simply providing information, however, is not sufficient for creating or changing a national image. At evaluation, trial and adoption stages, personal contact and conversation with individuals who are perceived as credible sources are the most influential (Wilcox and Cameron, 2009). Interpersonal communication within social networks increases the rate of adoption of new products and ideas (Rogers, 2003). Therefore, interpersonal public relations and marketing campaigns should receive more attention in the area of national image management.

Nonetheless, there has been little national PR research that identifies the integral communication path at the interpersonal level. Despite the importance of interpersonal communication, the concept of word-of-mouth has only a passing mention in marketing textbooks (Mason, 2008). Word-of-mouth researches are limited to the consumer market (Buttle, 1998). Further,

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researchers pay attention to only one side of communication: reliable information provider (Peters, 1987; Rice, 2001), or influential information generator (Doyle, 1998; Dye, 2000). In addition, by emphasizing the function as a promotion tool, many studies set positive word-of-mouth intentions as an outcome variable (Yang, Shin, Lee, & Wrigley, 2008). Thus, researchers have not considered two sides of audience function at the same time. As suggested by Mason (2008) for a future study, research from the word-of-mouth receiver's viewpoint should examine how people react, how and why people are influenced, and what is effective and acceptable.

Moreover, one segment in a national PR has been significantly overlooked. Out of the four groups divided by residence (South Korea or other countries) and nationality (Koreans or foreigners) (Yeom & Oh, 2003), foreigners who stay or live in South Korea typically have not been examined in the nation-branding practices and studies. Especially, international students, who have been actively studied in the context of higher education, appear to have a higher probability of being loyal to their hosting countries, because of their longer stay in the countries and higher chance of cultural experience and personal exchange with local people (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Peacock & Harrison, 2009; Shin, 2011; Trice, 2004; Volet & Ang, 1998). In terms of personal contact route, local people and cultural image seem to play a crucial role in the overall image building of the nation (Jimenez & Martin, 2010).

Among many cultural factors related to building a nation's image, food is probably one of the most vital. Traditional food holds high value in cultural category. Having an experience of authentic food may increase the understanding of cross-cultural encounter and broaden its range (Bessiere, 2001; Seo, Lee, & Shin, 2003). Indeed, food can work as the easiest path in experiencing Korean culture during the cultural acquisition process of international students. The body of research about a country's food and restaurants, however, has mainly targeted tourists (Su, 2013).

Communication through the mass media or small-scale media such as brochures or newsletters prevails in public relations, but the PR area shifts its focus into symmetrical communication activities that may depend more on interpersonal communication than ever (Toth, 2010). PR researchers have argued for the application of relational perspectives from interpersonal communication in public relations (Coombs, 2001). Thus, this research aims to examine the comprehensive path of communication at the entirely interpersonal level from information seeking in the past (consumption of message) via social interaction (mediator) to word-of-mouth intentions in the future (production of message). In this process, international students are the target and food is discussed as a bridge for interaction between people (Bessiere, 2001). It attempts to analyze the full path of international communication from the applied communication perspectives, such as PR and marketing. Therefore, the results will be conducive to exploring who can be the new strategic public, how the target can be efficiently reached and what can enhance desirable behaviors from the target.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Nation branding

Today, the concept of brand is no longer restricted to a company. As nations are actively competing against each other in the global market, they also create, shape, and manage their own national brand (Passow et al., 2005). Despite its imprecise overall image, a nation can be considered as a brand representing its unique nationality (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2000). As a specific concept which separates a certain nation from the others (Kim & Park, 2011), a national brand comprises the outside world's ideas about a particular country (van Ham, 2001). Distinguishable from a national brand, nation branding is a process of shaping an image and building the reputation of a country (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2000). That is, nation branding applies branding and marketing communications techniques to promote a nation's image (Fan, 2006). Ideally, PR can shape the nation branding process in order to create a positive result for a country.

Many researchers have explored the value of national PR from the perspectives of nation branding, but past PR research focused mainly on the country's image management (Kim & Jang, 2011; Lee, 2009; Lee & Choi, 2007; Lee & Kim, 2008). The existing research focus has been mainly on foreigners' attitude toward and perception of South Korea and how they have been affected by several influencing factors, such as a prior trip to South Korea and mass media news. None of the research committed to reviewing a specific target or message within the concept of nation branding.

Moreover, foreigners living in South Korea have been little examined as a potential target. Especially, apparently, the rapidly growing group of foreigners in South Korea (KEDI, 2010): international students in universities. It is evident that international students are generally open-minded and favorable to South Korea and its culture, as they selected South Korea as a place to study and stay. Wilson (1985) also indicated that a returned exchange student has an awareness and appreciation of a host country and its culture to pass on. One of the common benefits to international students is learning about cultural differences (Button et al., 2005; Volet & Ang, 1998). Specifically food is a foreground in cultural experience, because it holds high leverage as a component of a nation's culture. Lee, Hwang, Jeon, and Lee (2010) found foreign residents in South Korea recognized Korean culture through food. That is, the experience with Korean food strongly influenced their perception of the country. The traditional cuisine provided entertainment quality for foreigners, and also acted as a continuum, linking them to the nation's core culture (Oh, 2001). In essence, food is an easily approachable cultural component in any country.

Consequently, nation branding varies depending on what is being branded, as it is a complicated and somewhat confused construct. It embraces political, cultural, business and sport activities (Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2001) and even education in the era of internationalization (Knight, 2011). Nation branding is not just limited to marketing but also involves almost all aspects of a nation's character. However, it is simply deemed as another term for country-of-origin effect or place marketing (Kotler,

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