

Online Social Relations and Country Reputation

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This study examines the effects of online connectedness and information use regarding other countries on individuals' evaluations of those countries. Theoretical and operational definitions of the variables are developed and then used to investigate how they affect people's ratings of other countries' reputations in this age of online social networking. A survey of South Korean Internet users provides empirical data for this study. The results show that online connectedness through social media is a more powerful predictor of individuals' evaluations of other countries than is their use of the Internet for simple information gathering. Results also demonstrate that personal experience of visiting other countries remains the most significant predictor of a person's favorability toward those countries.

Keywords: Internet, online social relations, online information use, country reputation, strategic communication

Introduction

Digital networks have permeated almost every aspect of our lives, including the ways we build and maintain relationships with others. For example, recent reports have shown that more people are turning to the Web to keep in touch with friends and acquaintances. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, the proportion of adult Internet users in the United States maintaining a profile on an online social networking site soared from 8% in 2005 to 46% in 2009 (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; Zickuhr, 2010). In 2010, about 83% of millennial Internet users (ages 18 to 33) use online social network sites (Zickuhr, 2010). This phenomenon is not confined to the United States. Social network sites and other emergent forms of social media are an important part of citizens' daily lives in other countries as well. In South Korea, Brazil, China, and Mexico, for example, the use of social media sites is more prevalent than in the United States (Anderson & Rainie, 2010; KISA, 2009).

With the growing importance of the Internet in social relations, researchers have examined different facets of the topic, such as characteristics of online social network ties (Cummings & Higgins, 2006; Ledbetter, DeGroot, Meyer, Mao, & Swafford, 2011) and the impact of the Internet on civic engagement and political participation (Hanson, Haridakis, Cunningham, Sharma, & Ponder, 2010; Hindman, 2009; Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Smith, Schlozman, Verba, &

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Brady, 2009; Xenos & Moy, 2007). While the volume of research in this area has increased, there remains a dearth of research on how these changes have influenced our understanding of other countries. How, for example, does online social networking influence our perspectives on relationships with citizens and organizations in other countries? More generally, how do our online network connections with other countries affect our perceptions of the images of those countries? An increasing emphasis has been placed on the use of digital media to promote a country's image around the world (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2008; Lord, 2008), but researchers have yet to figure out whether and how these new forms of communication affect people's perceptions of other countries.

This research examines relationships between South Korean individuals' online social networking and online information use with regard to the United States and their favorability ratings of the United States. Empirical data come from a survey of South Korean adult Internet users in spring 2010. South Korea was chosen because the country has the highest household broadband penetration rate in the world, and an overwhelming majority of its citizens use the Internet (KISA & KCC, 2009). In addition, a high level of international Internet bandwidth between South Korea and the United States indicates much Internet-based communication between the two countries (TeleGeography, 2012). Moreover, the United States is a salient country in the minds of South Koreans. South Korea and the United States have maintained a robust, if sometimes tumultuous, political and military alliance dating back to the end of World War II (Kim & Lim, 2007). While the two countries still hold relatively strong military, political, and economic ties, South Korea has seen nationwide citizen protests against the U.S. military presence in South Korea, the U.S. handling of the death of two teenage South Korean girls who were hit and killed by a U.S. armored vehicle in 2002, importation of U.S. beef, and, most recently, the U.S.-South Korea free trade agreement. Younger generations of South Koreans who have no direct experience of the Korean War (1950-1953) and grew up in a more economically advanced South Korea have been a driving force behind these protests demanding a more equal relationship between the two countries.

This study advances research on country reputation and public diplomacy by showing how different degrees (frequency and amount) and types of connections individuals have with other countries influence their understandings of those countries. The results of the study also have policy implications for those interested in the practice of international marketing and public diplomacy and in international communication more generally.

Country Reputation in the Networked Information Age

Internet-based information and communication technologies have brought about important changes in society, particularly with regard to producing and sharing information and knowledge. In this study, the term *networked information society* refers to a society where digital information and communication technologies facilitate decentralized and transnational networking among actors. The wide-scale and low-cost availability of digital communication tools has facilitated ordinary citizens' participation in both domestic and international sociopolitical movements (Benkler, 2006; Castells, 2000, 2004; Seo & Thorson, 2012). This is why countries are now spending more resources for public diplomacy aimed at enhancing national image or country reputation on the global stage (Gilboa, 2008; Lord, 2008; Nye, 2008). Reputation of a product's country of origin plays an important role in consumer choice behavior

(Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2001; Nebenzahl & Jaffe, 1996), and individuals' images of other countries can affect their support of or opposition to those countries (Beeman, 2005; Stein, 1996). Thus, it is critical to understand factors that influence a person's image of other countries in this networked information society.

Factors Influencing Country Reputation

Various factors influence how individuals think of other countries, but a few in particular have been found to have significant effects. They include the experience of visiting a country, social relations with people in that country, and information obtained through mass media (Anholt, 2007; DeFleur & DeFleur, 2003; Fullerton, 2005; Fullerton, Hamilton, & Kendrick, 2007; Park, 2005; Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004). While the main focus of this study is to investigate whether and how online social networks affect cognitive and affective judgments of other countries, it is important to take into account traditionally studied factors as well.

Personal Experience

Personal experience with other countries has been considered one of the most important factors that influence people's perceptions of other countries (Anholt, 2007; Park, 2005). According to Anholt (2007), firsthand experience of visiting a country as a tourist or business traveler is often "the most important and most powerful" (p. 88) way of branding a nation. That is because personal experience may provide individuals with a more complete and sometimes quite different image of a country than the mass media provide. Thus, Anholt suggests that tourism promotion is one of the important channels that countries can use to advance their images abroad.

Mass Media

Many people form attitudes toward other countries even without firsthand experience with those countries. Mass media offer audiences opportunities for indirect experience with other countries by disseminating much of the information available about those other countries (DeFleur & DeFleur, 2003; Fullerton, 2005; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2004; Kunczik, 1997; Smith, 1973; Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004). In this sense, mass media are an important factor to study in seeking to understand how people form an image or sense of reputation of other countries. This so-called mediated experience is often crucial in shaping individuals' perceptions of other countries, because people get most of their information about other countries from the media when they lack direct firsthand experience. In addition to news media, entertainment media can influence individuals' understandings of other countries (DeFleur & DeFleur, 2003; Fullerton, Hamilton, & Kendrick, 2007). There is no consensus on the valence of entertainment media effects. While DeFleur and DeFleur (2003) suggested that U.S. media produce negative attitudes toward the United States, Fullerton et al.'s (2007) study of Singaporean college students found a positive association between exposure to U.S. entertainment media and attitudes toward the United States.

Demographic Factors

Several demographic variables are relevant to this study. Socioeconomic status and age tend to be closely related to Internet use, online social relations, and experience of other countries (KISA & KCC, 2009). Specifically, people with higher levels of education and income are more likely to have access to computing devices, get information online, and have opportunities to experience other countries firsthand. In terms of the effects of age, younger generations tend to adopt new technologies more easily and quickly than older generations. However, younger people are less likely to be able to afford to trips to other countries. Age seems to be a particularly important factor in studying South Koreans' views on the United States, considering recent demonstrations of anti-U.S. sentiment among young South Koreans (Kim & Lim, 2007; Shin, 1996).

Online Social Relations and Online Information Use

Scholarship on the Internet and political participation differentiates two forms of political activities online: behaviors involving interactions with other people and information seeking (Katz, Rice, & Aspden, 2001; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). These two aspects are directly related to the topic of the current study. Individuals may form perceptions of other countries through their online interactions with people from those countries and also through simply seeking information on the countries. These two aspects are considered as *online social relations* and *online information use*.

The term *online social relations* in this study refers to the number and intensity of social networks built and maintained online. At an individual level, the nodes of a social network consist of people—friends, families, and others. At a macro level, social networks include groups and organizations (Golder, Wilkinson, & Huberman, 2007).

In his study of the perceptions of Koreans and Japanese toward each other, Park (2005) found that Japanese students who have personal contacts with friends or relatives from South Korea tend to have a more positive perception of Korean culture than those without personal contacts. Park argues that friends and relatives from other countries help individuals better understand other countries and their cultures. In addition, Selltitz and his colleagues (1963) suggest that foreign students who have extensive and close social relations with the United States possess more favorable attitudes toward the United States. These studies suggest that social networks can play a significant role in forming one's attitudes toward other countries. Does this hold for online social relations?

In examining the association between people's online social relations and their understandings of other countries, this study focuses on two important aspects of online social networks: *size* and *time* (Vergeer & Pelzer, 2009). Network size is the scope of online social networks—the number of people that respondents socialize with. Thus, in empirical research of online social networks, network size, from the perspective of a given person, can be operationalized as the number of people connected with that person through social network sites. Studies have found that both weak and strong ties are maintained on social network sites (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Network time refers to the amount time spent on

socializing with other people online (Vergeer & Pelzer, 2009). The amount of time spent on online social networks may indicate the strength of the relationships.

While traditional mass media significantly influence people's perceptions of other countries, diverse online communication tools such as social media have become important channels for obtaining information about various aspects of our personal and social lives, including events happening in other countries (OECD, 2010). Thus, the information that people obtain from different websites may influence their understandings of other countries. Consequently, it is important to study the effect of individuals' information use on their evaluations of other countries. This study investigates how individuals consume different sources of information online and how this influences their perceptions of other countries.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Individuals' personal experience with other countries—in particular, their experience of visiting those countries and/or having friends or relatives in the countries—tends to positively affect their perceptions of those countries (Anholt, 2007; Park, 2005). Therefore, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H1: The more personal experience South Koreans have with the United States, the more positively they rate the reputation of the United States.

People use social networking sites mainly to nurture existing, offline social relations, although some also use them to build new relationships with those who share similar goals or interests (Ellison et al., 2007; Kraut et al., 2002). Therefore, it can be hypothesized that those who have more personal experience—operationalized in this study by their reported visits to the United States and reported friend and family ties with the country—will have more online social relations with the United States. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H2: The more personal experience South Koreans have with the United States, the more online social relations they will have with the United States.

Little empirical research exists regarding how individuals' interactions with people in another country influence their perceptions of that country. Thus, this study explores two research questions concerning South Koreans' online social relations and online information use with regard to the United States and their views of the United States.

RQ1: How is the degree of online social relations South Koreans have with the United States associated with their rating of the reputation of the United States?

RQ2: How is the degree of online information use South Koreans have with regard to the United States associated with their rating of the reputation of the United States?

Method

This research used survey methodology to study a large group of South Korean adults' perceptions of the United States and their use of social network sites and other types of websites with regard to the United States.

Sample

The target population for this survey was South Korean Internet users 18 years of age and older, residing in South Korea at the time of the survey, which was spring 2010. An Internet user is defined as someone who has used the Internet within the past month (International Telecommunication Union, 2003; KISA & KCC, 2009). South Korea was chosen because the country has the highest household broadband penetration rate in the world, and an overwhelming majority of its citizens use the Internet (KISA & KCC, 2009). In addition, the United States and South Korea share a high level of international Internet bandwidth (TeleGeography, 2012) as well as close political, economic, and diplomatic relations.

To ensure variability in participants' experience with the United States, five groups of people were contacted to participate in the survey: (1) South Korean Fulbright scholars; (2) South Korean journalists covering the country's Foreign Ministry; (3) South Korean members of Café USA, a U.S. Embassy-run online community; (4) South Korean businesspeople working at one of the country's top conglomerates; and (5) South Korean students majoring in communication at a university in Seoul. Relevant agencies and authorities helped the author contact these groups. First, the Fulbright Commission in Seoul (Korean-American Education Commission) forwarded the author's recruitment e-mail to its alumni. Second, the author contacted South Korean journalists who were listed with the Foreign Ministry. Third, the U.S. Embassy in Seoul posted a link to the survey on its Café USA site. Fourth, a senior officer at a Seoul-based conglomerate distributed the recruitment e-mail to employees. Finally, a communication professor in Seoul distributed the recruitment e-mail to his students.

Instrumentation

The survey was designed to examine each respondent's (1) general Internet use, (2) degree and intensity of online social relations with the United States, (3) online information use with regard to the United States, (4) rating of the reputation of the United States, (5) personal experience with the United States, (6) socioeconomic status, and (7) other demographic variables, including age.

The participants were asked a series of questions about their Internet use. The survey questions on this topic covered frequency, patterns, and purposes of Internet use. With regard to the frequency of their Internet use, participants were asked to indicate how often they use the Internet on average and how many hours they use the Internet on the days they use it.

To measure their level of online social relations, participants were asked to answer two sets of questions about network size and network time. Online network size was measured by asking participants approximately how many people in the United States are connected with them through each of these

social networking sites: Cyworld, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and other. To measure online network time, participants were asked how frequently they do each of six activities online: read/write e-mail, chat, read posts by friends, add a comment, send a personal message, and send a friend request. The reliability of the resulting scale was tested by Cronbach's alpha, and the value was .87.

Respondents' use of U.S.-related websites for information about the United States was measured by asking how often they visit the home pages or social networking sites of U.S. government agencies, U.S.-based nongovernmental organizations, U.S. news media, U.S. news portals, and U.S. popular culture sources, clubs, fan pages, etc. to get information about the United States. They were also asked to indicate their level of participation in those activities. The resulting scale led to a Cronbach's alpha of .85.

To measure how South Koreans rate the reputation of the United States, five aspects of the country were measured: (1) emotional appeal, (2) economic appeal, (3) leadership appeal, (4) cultural appeal, and (5) global appeal. The author modified the Fombrun-RI Country Reputation Index (Passow, Fehlmann, & Grahlow, 2005) to include the specific context of Korea-U.S. relations. Respondents were asked to indicate on a 5-point scale how much they agree or disagree with 15 items. The resulting scale led to a Cronbach's alpha of .89.

Participants' experience with the United States was measured by asking how many times they had visited the country, what was the length of their longest stay in the country, and how many friends and family members they had in the United States. The resulting scale led to a Cronbach's alpha of .85.

To estimate the respondents' socioeconomic status, the author asked about their level of education (highest level of education completed), occupation, and annual household income. The resulting scale led to a Cronbach's alpha of .80. Other demographic questions in the survey asked about age, nationality, and gender.

Pretest and Survey Administration

An e-mail requesting participation in the pretest was sent to 50 South Koreans. Of the 50 e-mails, 4 failed to be delivered. Of the 46 valid requests, 17 people participated in the pretest, resulting in a 37% response rate. Respondents were asked to identify questions, answer choices, or statements that were ambiguous or difficult to comprehend and provide suggestions for changes. Based on their feedback, several questions and statements were rephrased to enhance their clarity.

The final survey questionnaire was in Korean and created through a professional online survey website, SurveyGizmo.com. Using an online survey was both a practical and appropriate decision for several reasons. The target population was South Korean Internet users, and thus not being able to reach non-Internet users was not a concern. In addition, it was expected that through electronic means the author would be better able to include South Koreans in different areas of the country without being constrained by a budget for data collection. Furthermore, previous studies have supported the validity of online surveys (Dillman, 2000; Schonlau, Fricker, & Elliott, 2002). When the online survey was ready, a

link to the survey was sent to target participants. The survey was open from early March to early May 2010.

Results

A total of 245 South Korean Internet users participated in the survey. The response rate was 24%. This response rate does not include the South Koreans who were contacted through the U.S. Embassy's Café USA website since that number is unknown. Thirty-two cases were eliminated due to incomplete responses, and an additional 5 cases were taken out due to multivariate non-normality based on Mahalanobis distance values (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Therefore, subsequent analyses are based on responses from 208 South Korean Internet users. The main demographic characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 1. These demographic characteristics are comparable to those of the population of South Korean Internet users as estimated by a 2009 survey of the Korea Internet and Security Agency and the Korea Communication Commission (2009). The KISA and KCC survey found that more men (82.4%) than women (71.9%) use the Internet, with men accounting for 54% of Internet users in South Korea and women 46%. More South Koreans in their 20s (99.7%) and 30s (98.8%) use the Internet than those in their 40s (84.3%) and 50s (52.3%). Those who have high levels of education and income use the Internet more than those with lower levels of education and income.

The respondents were almost equally divided with regard to their experience of visiting the United States; about 51% of the participants said they had never visited the United States, and 49% said they had visited the country at least once. Most of them had friends or family members in the United States. To obtain information about the United States, the respondents rely most on U.S. news portal sites such as Google News and Yahoo! News ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.57$), followed by U.S. news media sites such as online editions of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.55$), websites related to U.S. popular culture ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 1.31$), U.S. government agencies ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 1.19$), and U.S. nongovernmental agencies ($M = 1.71$, $SD = 1.09$).

The most popular social network site that respondents use to connect with people in the United States is Facebook ($M = 1.41$, $SD = 0.94$), followed by Twitter ($M = 1.26$, $SD = 0.64$), Cyworld ($M = 1.15$, $SD = 0.55$), LinkedIn ($M = 1.09$, $SD = 0.45$), and MySpace ($M = 1.06$, $SD = 0.36$). With regard to their online activities for interacting with people in the United States, participants spent the most time reading posts by friends ($M = 1.99$, $SD = 1.42$), e-mailing ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 1.41$), adding comments ($M = 1.75$, $SD = 1.33$), sending a personal message through social network sites ($M = 1.59$, $SD = 1.23$), chatting online through Skype or MSN Messenger ($M = 1.53$, $SD = 1.15$), and sending a friend request ($M = 1.34$, $SD = 0.89$).

The respondents' overall rating of the reputation of the United States was slightly positive ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.56$). The most positive evaluations pertained to the economic appeal of the United States ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.60$), which is related to the country's economic environment and infrastructure, among other factors. The next most positively rated aspect is the leadership appeal ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.74$), which is measured by how much participants agreed that the United States has charismatic leaders and communicates an appealing vision of the country. The respondents were neutral with regard to the

emotional appeal ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.76$) and the cultural appeal ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.72$) of the United States. The respondents were somewhat negative about the global appeal ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 0.72$) of the United States, suggesting their dissatisfaction with U.S. management of international affairs.

Table 1. Characteristics of Survey Participants.

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Gender	Male	129	62
	Female	79	38
	Total	208	100.0
Age (mean age = 32)	20–29	95	45.7
	30–39	76	36.5
	40–49	30	14.4
	Over 50	7	3.4
	Total	208	100.0
Education	High school or less	7	3.4
	Some college	44	21.2
	College graduates	97	46.6
	Master's/professional school degree	51	24.5
	Doctoral degree	9	4.3
	Total	208	100.0
Annual household income	Less than \$18,000	19	9.1
	\$18,000 to less than \$36,000	34	16.6
	\$36,000 to less than \$54,000	69	33.7
	\$54,000 to less than \$72,000	48	23.4
	\$72,000 to less than \$90,000	16	7.8
	\$90,000 to less than \$108,000	11	5.4
	\$108,000 and more	8	3.9
	Total	205	100.0%

The AMOS 17.0 statistical package was used to test the relationships of the variables specified in the hypotheses and research questions. The first hypothesis posited that South Koreans' personal experience with the United States would be positively associated with their rating of the reputation of the United States. This hypothesis was supported, with $\beta = .37$ ($B = .15$, $SE = .04$), $p < .001$. In testing the relationship, respondents' socioeconomic status and age were controlled for. This suggests that the more personal experience South Koreans have with the United States, the more positively they rate the reputation of the United States.

The second hypothesis predicted a positive association between South Koreans' personal experience with the United States and their degree of online social relations with people in the United States. In testing the relationship, respondents' socioeconomic status and age were controlled for. This

analysis found support for the hypothesis, with $\beta = .26$ ($B = .02$, $SE = .01$), $p < .05$. Therefore, the more personal experience participants had with the United States, the more online social relations they had with people in the United States.

The first research question concerned the relationship between the degree of South Koreans' online social relations and their rating of the reputation of the United States. There was a statistically significant negative association between the two variables, with $\beta = -.34$ ($B = -1.78$, $SE = .93$), $p = .05$. In examining this relationship, respondents' personal experience with the United States, information use with regard to the United States, socioeconomic status, and age were controlled for. This indicates that the more online social relations South Koreans have with the United States, the more negatively they rate the reputation of the United States.

The second research question asked how South Koreans' use of online information with regard to the United States is associated with their rating of the reputation of the United States. There was no statistically significant relationship between the two, with $\beta = .22$ ($B = .57$, $SE = .46$), $p = .21$. In examining respondents' personal experience with the United States, online social relations with the United States, socioeconomic status, and age were controlled for.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to investigate the roles of online social relations and information use in forming people's perceptions of other countries in the age of information technology and online social networking. This study provides insights into understanding national image and country reputation in the networked information age and offers policy implications for those working in the area of international communication and public diplomacy.

One of the most interesting findings of this research involves the role of online social relations as measured by the size of online social networks with the United States (network size) and the time spent interacting online with people in the United States (network time). This study found that the more online social relations South Korean Internet users had with people in the United States, the less positively these South Koreans rated the reputation of the United States. In contrast with this finding, but in line with previous research (Anholt, 2007; Park, 2005), the current study found a positive effect of South Koreans' offline personal experiences with the United States on their perceptions of the United States.

Why does an individual's level of online social relations with people in the United States have a negative association with that individual's rating of the United States? What is it about online social relations that makes them different from offline personal relations? Previous research on online and offline social interactions offers important clues to interpreting this finding. Studies have suggested that personal or social relations based largely on Internet communication often lack empathy, understanding, and trust in comparison with those involving face-to-face interactions. For example, Rockmann and Northcraft's (2008) research on group collaboration showed that groups meeting in person demonstrated more trust and effective cooperation than those who relied on e-mail. Based on their findings, the scholars recommended that companies ensure that employees have enough in-person time to build or maintain the

trust necessary for effective collaboration. Konrath, O'Brien, and Hsing (2011) found that college students these days have significantly less empathy than students in the past and suggested that this may be partly a result of college students' increased reliance on online communication in building and maintaining their social networks. Therefore, the kinds of relationships South Koreans forge or sustain online may not necessarily help them form empathetic understandings and trust of the United States.

It is also important to note that negative information tends to carry more weight than comparable positive information (Lau, 1982, 1985; Reyes, Thompson, & Bower, 1980; Wanta et al., 2004). Thus, when friends and families criticize certain aspects of the United States, this negative information about the United States may have a stronger influence on South Koreans than positive information about the United States their friends and families may offer. In fact, Wanta et al.'s study (2004) found that negative media coverage of a country led individuals to think negatively of the country, whereas positive coverage did not show such a correlation. Their study was based on U.S. public opinion surveys on 26 foreign countries and the U.S. network coverage of those countries.

At least two important explanations exist for why negative information is more influential than comparable positive information in cognitive processing tasks: the figure-ground hypothesis and the cost-orientation hypothesis (Lau, 1985). According to the figure-ground hypothesis, negative information tends to stand out because we live in a largely positive world where we get more positive information than negative information. Thus, negative information is "perceptually more salient, more easily noticed, and therefore more easily processed" (Lau, 1985, p. 121). The cost-orientation hypothesis suggests that negative information is more influential than positive information because people are more motivated to avert losses than to move toward gains.

In contrast, the composite index of South Koreans' online information use showed no statistically significant association with their rating of the United States' reputation. This indicates that South Koreans are more influenced by what their friends or families say about the United States than by information they get through U.S. government, nongovernmental, and media websites. This supports the argument that relationship-based approaches to public diplomacy would be more effective than information-based ones (Seo, 2013; Zaharna, 2009). While the composite variable of online information use was not a significant predictor of participants' ratings of the United States' reputation when taking into account the effects of the other variables, a few measurement items for the variable showed interesting bivariate correlations with the U.S. reputation variable. In particular, bivariate correlations indicate that the more frequently South Koreans visited U.S. nongovernmental websites, the less positive view of the United States they reported. This may be because nongovernmental organizations tend to be critical of the U.S. government's policies and generally highlight problems that they believe need to be addressed. It is also possible that those who have negative views of U.S. approaches to global issues pay more attention to U.S. nongovernmental organizations.

In addition, there were positive correlations between the frequency of visiting U.S. news media and news portal sites for information about the United States and the rating of the United States' reputation. This may indicate that the information South Koreans get through U.S. media sites make them feel more positively about the United States. This finding is consistent with the results of Fullerton et al.'s

study (2007) showing a positive correlation between Singaporean college students' exposure to U.S. entertainment media and favorability toward the United States. On the other hand, it is also possible that, as selective exposure theory suggests (Zillmann & Bryant, 1985), those who already hold positive attitudes toward the United States are more likely to seek out information from U.S. news media sites.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this study offers several new and interesting findings, it is important that readers be reminded of some limitations of the study. The sample is skewed toward the intellectual elite. However, it was selected to ensure variance in respondents' exposure to online content and personal experiences regarding the United States. Because the survey is based on nonprobability sampling, it is difficult to generalize the findings to a larger population. However, the sampling method was appropriate for this study's goal of investigating the effects of individuals' online social relations with other countries and their perceptions of those countries. A survey based on a national representative sample would provide more generalizable results. In addition, future research can compare South Koreans' use of the Internet with their perceptions of countries other than the United States. This will help us better understand the relationships between the variables. It would also be useful to study how citizens in other countries such as China and Japan use the Internet with regard to the United States and how they perceive the country. In both cases, it would be helpful to include countries with different levels of Internet penetration to see whether the aggregate level of Internet connections makes any difference.

Contributions

This research makes several important contributions to the field of communication and other areas of research. Most importantly, this research offers a comprehensive account of the workings of online networking and connectedness. The theoretical and operational definitions of online social relations and online information use lay a foundation for future studies on individuals' understandings of other countries in the network information age. This is one of the few studies that takes into account the role of online social networks in studying influential factors on individuals' perceptions of other countries and international events.

The results of the study have policy implications for those who work in the areas of international communication or public diplomacy, both in governmental and nongovernmental agencies. While online social networking is an increasingly important and relevant part of reaching out to key global constituents, it is important to understand the limitations of Internet-only initiatives. Online interactions may complement offline interactions but cannot replace them. To forge empathy- and trust-based relationships with global publics, online and offline activities should be combined. The U.S. Department of State's Democracy Video Challenge was a step in the right direction. In 2009 and 2010, the State Department worked with nongovernmental organizations to create an online video competition that invited citizens around the world to submit to a YouTube site short original videos on democracy. The State Department used various social media sites to facilitate global conversations around this campaign and to invite people around the world to vote online to determine winners. Winners were invited to the United States to meet filmmakers, government officials, and civic and business leaders.

This study advances research on how individuals' online social networks, facilitated by changes in the structure of global connectedness, affect their ratings of other countries. Network-induced changes at the individual level have important implications for diplomacy, trade, and global activism. As Slaughter (2009) put it, "connectedness" is "the measure of power" in this world, and thus it is essential to understand how different types of connections are initiated, developed, and maintained in this network information age.

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