

Three Korean perspectives on U.S. internet public diplomacy

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Abstract

This study identifies perspectives of relationships publics have about countries other than their own and examines whether publics engaged through social media-based public diplomacy programs demonstrate different relationship perspectives. Q methodology and survey research were used to investigate these issues. Data come from South Korean adult internet users, including members of Café USA, an online community run by the U.S. Embassy in Seoul. Three relationship perspectives were identified: *outcome-based*, *sincerity-based*, and *access-based*. Compared with other groups, Café USA members put more emphasis on sincerity in their relationships with the United States. The results of this study indicate that individuals' subjectivity should be considered as far more contextualized and nuanced than has been the case in previous research on national image or country reputation.

Introduction

Increasing availability and affordability of digital technologies are enabling people to build new types of transnational and decentralized networks. In recognition of this digital media environment, governments have begun using online-based communication tools to interact with global publics as part of their public diplomacy efforts. For example, the U.S. Department of State has used social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to engage global publics. Some U.S. embassies have created social networking sites on one or more of their host countries' popular websites to interact with publics in that country.

While the importance to public diplomacy of relationships with global publics has been recognized, there remains little empirical research examining what specific aspects are important for a particular country's relationships with publics other than their own. In particular, do publics engaged through social media-based public diplomacy programs emphasize different aspects of relationship compared with those who have not been part of such programs? If so, how? And what role does culture play in this?

This study used Q methodology and survey research to (i) identify perspectives on relationships with the United States by South Koreans participating in Café USA run by the U.S. Embassy in Seoul and (ii) compare those relationship perspectives with those of other South Koreans who have similar experiences with the United States but have not participated in Café USA. This is one of the first studies investigating the roles of individuals' perspectives on relationships with a particular country in their understandings of that country. This research helps fill the gap between theory and practice by showing how relationship building and relationship management between a country and its publics in other countries can be measured in this networked information age. Conclusions from this study also provide clues as to what types of networks might be facilitated to maintain and strengthen relationships with global publics.

Methods

Since the focus of this research is on types of reasoning rather than attributes of individual respondents, Q methodology was used to identify South Koreans' perspectives on relationships with the United States. Q methodology allows for systematic investigation of human subjectivity demonstrating perspectives, opinions, beliefs, or attitudes. A 33-item Q sample of statements was

drawn from materials generated by focus groups of South Koreans and previous studies on relationships, in particular organization-public relationships (e.g., L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Ki & Hon, 2009). In addition, survey research was conducted to further examine how participants' relationship perspectives influence their evaluations of the reputation of the United States. Country reputation items used in the survey were modified from Fombrun-RI Country Reputation Index (Passow, Fehlmann, & Grahlow, 2005). The survey also examined South Koreans' personal experience of visiting the United States. Both the survey and Q-sort were administered online. Data for this study come from South Korean adult internet users. South Korea is chosen because it is likely that there is considerable variety in South Koreans' perspectives on the United States, given both the significance of the United States for many aspects of Korean society and the controversy surrounding Korea-U.S. relations. To ensure variability in participants' experience with the United States, three specific groups of people were contacted to participate in this study. The groups included (i) South Korean members of Café USA, a U.S. Embassy-run online community; (ii) South Korean Fulbright scholars; and (iii) South Korean journalists covering the country's Foreign Ministry.

Findings

The subsequent analysis is based on Q sorts and survey data collected from 60 South Koreans – 20 from each group in this study. The Q data were correlated and factor analyzed using the PQMethod software, and the Q analysis identified three factors of South Koreans' perspectives on relationships with the United States. This suggests that there are three groups of the participants who had variant perceptions in sorting aspects of relationships with the United

States. The factors were labeled based on the statements related to each factor and the participants' responses to open-ended questions explaining why they sorted the way they did.

Those who loaded on the first factor emphasized results and providing opportunities as important aspects for their relationships with the United States. The participants loading on this factor are termed the *outcome*-based group. Fulbright scholars were the most prominent group loaded on this factor. The participants loaded on the second factor were labeled as the *sincerity*-based group, as the statements that represent their views reflect aspects of trust and sincerity such as "to make people like me feel respected" and "to treat people like me fairly and justly." This group was less concerned about the United States being successful or providing opportunities. In the open-ended responses, they emphasized the importance of trust and mutual respect for their relationships with the United States. Café USA members were the most prominent group loaded on this factor. The participants who loaded on the third factor are called the *access*-based group. The statements that represent their views include "to keep people like me informed of U.S. policies on a regular basis," and "to share enough information with people like me about its governance." Journalists tended to load on the access-based factor.

The three groups were similar in terms of their ratings of economic, leadership, cultural, and global reputation of the United States. However, there was an interesting difference between the sincerity-based group and the other groups in terms of their rating of the emotional appeal of the United States that was measured by how much they like and trust the United States. The sincerity-based group ($M = 2.97$, $SD = .87$) gave a much lower rating of the U.S. emotional

appeal than the outcome-based group ($M = 3.47$, $SD = .61$). Scheffe's post hoc test showed the difference was statistically significant.

Conclusion

This study investigated what aspects South Koreans think are important in their relationships with the United States and empirically identified three types of relationship perspectives: *sincerity-based*, *outcome-based*, and *access-based*. The outcome-based group emphasized results and providing opportunities as important aspects for their relationships with the United States. Trust and sincerity were considered essential to the sincerity-based group in terms of their relationships with the United States. The access-based group emphasized information sharing. Moreover, there was an interesting difference between the sincerity-based group and the outcome-based group in their rating of the U.S. emotional appeal; the outcome-based group liked and trusted the United States better than the sincerity-based group.

How can these differences be explained? The authors argue that the sincerity group represents a more traditional Korean Confucian ontology that puts relationships at the center of a person's existence. From Confucian perspectives, maintaining the harmony of the society is paramount, and it is therefore important that individuals understand, accept, and fulfill their roles as defined by their relationships with others. The sincerity group may think that the United States has not appropriately handled crucial issues involving the two countries such as the death of two teenage girls hit and killed by a U.S. armored vehicle in 2002. At that time, many Koreans called for sincere apology from the U.S. government but they felt the United States failed to do so. The U.S. position at that time was that they were handling the situation based on the existing Status

of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and other bilateral agreements. In contrast, the outcome-based group may represent Aristotelian ontology. Formal processes and regulations are important for this group, and they are less concerned with relationships. This group is likely to take *quid pro quo* approaches and as long as the United States is efficient and transparent in dealing with issues related to them – for example, visa issuance – they may be satisfied with the United States. Indeed, being efficient and successful were the aspects emphasized by those who belong to the outcome-based group in their relationships with the United States.

It is interesting to note that the sincerity perspective best represents most Café USA members' views of their relationships with the United States. The main objective of the U.S. Embassy Seoul in operating Café USA is to enhance mutual understanding and build trust (Seo & Thorson, 2010). The Embassy's continued efforts of engaging them through this relationship-based online community may help the two sides improve mutual understanding.

The results of this study indicate that individuals' subjectivity should be considered as far more contextualized and nuanced than has been the case in previous research on national image or country reputation. This study found that South Koreans with different types of perspectives on relationships demonstrated different levels of favorability toward the United States. This is an important first investigation of defining roles of individuals' perspectives on relationships with a particular country in their understandings of that country. A series of international public opinion studies ask people in different countries almost identical questions about how they understand other countries and these surveys are helpful for comparing global publics' attitudes toward a certain group of countries. However, it is equally important that researchers tailor survey

questionnaires to particular countries to take into account social, economic, and political conditions of those countries. Our research suggests that relationship perspective may be another important factor to consider in studying global publics' attitudes about countries other than their own. Effective public diplomacy in the age of information technology and social networking requires understanding what specific relationship aspects can be facilitated with publics in a range of countries.

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