

Country image and ideal destination choice in study abroad: Evidence from the Republic of Korea

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In a time of growing competition for tertiary education, international students represent an important resource. However, more work is required to detail the factors that influence destination choice in study abroad. Drawing from a representative sample ($n = 620$) of the adult population over 19 in the Republic of Korea, the present study examined the ideal choice of study abroad destinations for Koreans. The analysis tested for differences in their perceived country image of China, Japan and US and the demographic variables (age, educational attainment and monthly income) of those who selected the European Union, US, or other locations as their ideal primary study choice. ANCOVAs found that only US competence image ($p < .05$) and age ($p < .01$) were significant indicators of destination choice. These results suggest that country image and demographic background are not accurate predictors for destination choice. In fact, individual perceptions may be less important than country-level variables in the initial stages of study abroad destination choice.

Keywords: study abroad; destination choice; country image; higher education; Korea

INTRODUCTION

The global market for tertiary education now offers more choice of destination, more competition among education providers, and more alternatives to the traditional study abroad model than ever before. Between 1960 and 2010, the number of transnational students worldwide increased from 238,000 (McMahon, 1992) to 4.1 million (OECD, 2013). As student numbers have grown, their choices of destination have diversified. Regional destinations, such as the Republic of Korea, have begun to attract international students as part of a larger goal of building up internationally recognized research universities (UNESCO, 2013). Increasing transnational education has driven a multi-billion dollar industry (Institute for International Education, 2014a) that has left some higher education institutions (HEIs) in traditional markets, such as North America, Western Europe, and Oceania, dependent upon full fee paying international students as public funding declines (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). Meanwhile, HEIs in Asia are attempting to increase their market share (UNESCO, 2013).

Among source countries, the Republic of Korea (hereafter Korea) is a particularly interesting case. In 2013/2014, it was the third largest source of international students for

HEIs in the US behind only the People's Republic of China and India (Institute for International Education, 2014b). Considering the size of the population, Koreans are over-represented among international students. Korean international students contributed more than \$2.3 billion to the US economy in 2014, yet the number of Korean students studying in the US has fallen, on balance, since 2010 (Institute for International Education, 2014b). Understanding the Korean case may provide insight into the future of other source countries in the region.

Previous research into destination choice has focused largely on the factors that 'push' students to seek education outside of their home country and the factors that 'pull' students toward a destination. Push/pull models, such as the six-factor model proposed by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), provide general frameworks for conceptualizing cross-border student movement. Work continues on more fine-grained analysis of particular transnational student populations (e.g., Bamber, 2014; Foster, 2014; Lee, 2014; Lesjak, Juvan, Ineson, Yap, & Axelsson, 2015; Perna, Orosz, Jumakulov, Kishkentayeva, & Ashirbekov, 2015). Further research along these lines will resolve inconsistencies among the models while detailing how different individual and cultural contexts influence the study abroad decision-making process. Focusing on the case of Korea, the present study investigated the role of country image and demographic variables on ideal destination choice.

FROM COLONIAL TIES TO COUNTRY IMAGE

Though HEIs have always tended toward internationalism, freedom to choose a destination for study abroad is a new phenomenon. The global political structures of the past emphasized a single colonizer or superpower in most countries of the world, depriving international students of much choice in destination. In the colonial period from the 16th to mid-20th Centuries, education became a critical tie between European powers and their colonies across the world (Varghese, 2008). Migrants travelled to imperial capitals in order to be trained in the language, values and administrative structures of their colonizers, and secure the skills and networks of contacts that would grant them increased opportunities in their home countries. Following the dismantling of those empires in the aftermath of the World Wars, a similar structure emerged. Through the cold war period from 1947 to 1991, super-powers attracted international students from countries within their spheres of influence (Varghese, 2008).

Recent trends indicate that the global market for post-secondary education is steadily diversifying. Globalization affords transnational students opportunities to travel to a wider array of destinations and for more intraregional exchange (Varghese, 2008). In the US alone, the Institute for International Education (2014a) estimates 800,000 international students contributed more than \$26 billion to national and regional economies and supported 340,000 jobs in 2014.

Summarizing nearly 80 years of demographic research on migration, Lee (1966) identified four groups of factors contributing to the migration of peoples: (a) factors associated with the area of origin, (b) factors associated with the destination, (c) intervening obstacles, and (d) personal factors. McMahon (1992) applied this model to education-seeking migrants and found distinct influences, mostly economic, which both pushed students to study abroad and pulled students to destination countries. McMahon's work, spanning the period of rapid expansion of international education from the 1960s

to the 1980s, found that push factors and economic ties between sending and host countries were important predictors for destination choice.

With the opening of diverse options to ‘pushed’ students, pull factors have gained salience. Building on McMahon’s (1992) framework, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) proposed a six factor model: (a) knowledge and awareness of the destination country, (b) personal recommendations, (c) cost issues, (d) environment, (e) geographic proximity, and (f) social links. Alternatively, Cubillo, Sánchez, and Cerviño (2006) analyzed the effects of five factors on the intention to purchase higher education services from a foreign provider: (a) personal reasons, (b) country image, (c) city effect, (d) institution image, and (e) program evaluation. In the effort to adapt internationally-developed models to regional cultural concerns, Bodycott and Lai (2012) expand upon Bodycott (2009) to highlight the need to take into account the influence of family members (particularly parents) in the decision-making process of transnational students from Confucian heritage countries.

Among pull factors, country image has emerged as a key concept across disciplines. In tourism, country image serves as an important variable in the selection of a travel destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Sirakaya, Sonmez, & Choi, 2001; Woodside & King, 2001). In marketing, studies have tied country image, referred to in the discipline as country branding, to consumer choices (Erickson, Johansson, & Chao, 1984; Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 1993; Knight & Calantone, 2000; Manrai, Lascu, & Manrai, 1998; Olsen & Olsson, 2002). In political science, country image has drawn attention to the concept of soft power, or the ability of a country to sway international relations through cultural and economic influence (Nye, 2008; Rothman, 2011; Wang, 2008). Prior studies have found that a strong country image can improve exports, tourism, foreign direct investment, and make a destination attractive for immigrants (Fetscherin, 2010; Jaffe & Nebenzahl, 2001; Kleppe & Mossberg, 2006; Laroche, Papadopoulos, Heslop, & Mourali, 2005). These findings revealed a clear benefit for fostering and maintaining a positive country image. In study abroad destination choice, previous research has also emphasized the importance of country image over HEI branding (Chen, 2008; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008). This study focused exclusively on the influence of country image in destination choice.

Nadeau, Heslop, O’Reilly and Luk (2008) draw on Heslop, Papadopoulos, Dowdles, Wall and Compeau (2004) to propose a two-factor country image model: country character image and country competency image. Country character image consists of features commonly associated with the country and its people (Knight & Calantone, 2000; Lee & Ganesh, 1999), including quality of life, standard of living, commitment to the protection of the environment (Orbaiz & Papadopoulos, 2003; Parameswaran & Pisharodi, 2001), individual rights and freedoms, and political stability (Heslop et al., 2004). Country competency image consists of the perceived quality of design, industrial production, and military power. This includes perceived level of technical advancement, economic development, economic stability and wealth. This model provides a useful lens for examining the influence of different aspects of country image.

Focusing on the case of Korea, the present study investigated the role of country image and demographic variables in ideal destination choice. In doing so, the study determined whether assumptions drawn from the push-pull model for destination choice can also be generalized to other contexts. To these ends, the study tested three hypotheses:

Hypothesis I - Based on the global trend towards the diversification of destinations for study abroad, respondents will report a wide range of destinations for their ideal first choice for study abroad, with many participants choosing destinations within the region of East Asia & the Pacific.

Hypothesis II - Based on the assumptions of the push/pull model, respondents who choose a destination as their ideal first choice for study abroad will have a significantly more favourable view of that destination's country image than their compatriots who select other destinations as their ideal first choice.

Hypothesis III - Based on the assumptions of the push/pull model, respondents' selection of a destination as their ideal first choice for study abroad will vary significantly relative to their age, monthly household income, and educational attainment.

METHOD

This study examined the ideal first choice destinations for study abroad among Koreans over the age of 19. The analysis tested for differences in perceived country image and in demographic background among the groups of individuals with different ideal first choice destinations. The study used data from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs' (2008) *Soft Power in Asia* study. The set included information for each respondents' ideal first choice study abroad destination (coded as the European Union (EU)¹, US, and other countries) and perception of country character and competency image for China, Japan and the US.

Sample

Korean nationals ($n=620$) over the age of 19 took part in the study, of whom 49.5% were male ($n=307$) and 50.5% female ($n=313$). Table 1 provides details of the ages of respondents, Table 2 their province or metropolitan area, and Table 3 their educational attainment. Data collection took place between 22 January and 5 February 2008 as face-to-face interviews in Korean by the HanKook Research Company. The sample was drawn from all administrative regions except for Jeju, which was excluded based on its remote location, high costs and low percentage of the population (1.1%).

Table 1: Age

	Freq.	%	%
19-29	118	19.0	19.0
30-39	147	23.7	42.7
40-49	127	20.5	63.2
50-59	114	18.4	81.6
over 60	114	18.4	100.0
Total	620	100.0	

¹ These data were collected before the Brexit decision and, as a result, the UK was included. All countries that were members of the EU at the time of data collection (2008) are included in this grouping.

Table 2: Province or metropolitan area

	Freq.	%	Cumulative %
Seoul	137	22.1	22.1
Busan	50	8.1	30.2
Daegu	28	4.5	34.7
Incheon	27	4.4	39.0
Gwangju	17	2.7	41.8
Daejeon	18	2.9	44.7
Ulsan	13	2.1	46.8
Gyeonggi Province	147	23.7	70.5
Gangwon Province	16	2.6	73.1
N. Chungcheong Province	20	3.2	76.3
S. Chungcheong Province	26	4.2	80.5
N. Jeolla Province	25	4.0	84.5
S. Jeolla Province	21	3.4	87.9
N. Gyeongsang Province	33	5.3	93.2
S. Gyeongsang Province	42	6.8	100.0
Total	620	100.0	

Table 3: Educational attainment

Attainment	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
Middle school graduate, or below	86	13.9	13.9
High school graduate	194	31.3	45.2
College student	61	9.8	55.0
2-year college graduate	66	10.6	65.6
4-year university graduate	166	26.8	92.4
Postgraduate student, or above	46	7.4	99.8
DK/NA	1	.2	100.0
Total	620	100.0	

Variables

A categorical variable representing ideal first choice of destination and seven sub-variables for different aspects of country image were used. A country character image variable was calculated based on three country image sub-variables. A country competency variable was calculated from the other four of the country image sub-variables. All seven sub-variables comprise the overall country image variable. Country image variables include respondents' perceptions of China, Japan, and the US.

Ideal first choice destination was determined by the question: 'If you were to send your children to receive their higher education in another country, which country would be your first choice?' to which responses were coded: China, Japan, one of the countries of the EU, the US, Other, and don't know/no answer. A growing body of evidence indicates the importance of parents in cross-border higher education destination choice in the region (Bodycott, 2009; Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Lee & Morrish, 2012; Pham, 2013;

Pimpa, 2005), making this question an appropriate measure for a country in East Asia, such as Korea.

Country image sub-variables were measured based on closed interview responses. Respondents gave numerical values as their responses, or could reply 'I don't know.' Higher values reflected a more positive and lower values a more negative view. The interview questions are included in the appendix. The responses produced country image sub-variables for: (a) sense of personal connection, (b) diplomatic importance, (c) political system, (d) culture, (e) economy, (f) military prowess, (g) education and technology. Country character image consisted of the first four sub-variables, while country competency image consisted of the latter three. As different interview items used different scales (5-point Likert, 1 to 100, or 1 to 10), participants' responses were converted to z-scores in order to combine them into the sub-variables.

Analysis

Each step of the analysis addressed one of the three hypotheses. The test for hypothesis I was a report of the frequency of respondents' stated ideal first choice destinations for study abroad, based on the coding of the original data as China, Japan, one of the countries of the EU, the US, other and don't know/no answer.

The analysis for Hypothesis II tested for differences in perceived country image (character, competency and overall) of China, the US, and Japan among Koreans with different first choice destinations. Respondents were split into an EU first choice group ($n=250$), a 'US' first choice group ($n=274$), and an 'Other' first choice group ($n=92$). Don't know/no answer respondents were excluded from analysis because of their small group size ($n=8$). ANCOVAs were employed to examine for differences among first choice groups' perceptions of overall country image, country character image, and country competency image of China, Japan, and the US, controlling for age, monthly income, and educational attainment. Significant differences were further analyzed via Bonferroni pairwise comparisons.

The third step focused on hypothesis III and used ANCOVAs to test for differences in age, educational attainment, and monthly income between first choice groups, controlling for perceived country image. Significant differences were further analyzed via Bonferroni pairwise comparisons.

RESULTS

Hypothesis I - Respondents will report a wide range of destinations for their ideal first choice for study abroad, with a strong showing for destinations within the region of East Asia & the Pacific.

Table 4 illustrates the distribution of responses for ideal first choice destination. The results reject Hypothesis I, indicating a strong concentration of interest in the EU and US as destinations for study abroad.

Table 4: Frequency of first choice destination by origin

China	EU	Japan	US	Other	DK/NA
34	250	30	274	28	4

Hypothesis II - Respondents who choose a destination as their ideal first choice for study abroad will have a significantly more favourable view of that destination's country image (in terms of overall country image, country character image, and country competency image) than their compatriots who select other destinations as their ideal first choice.

The country image ANCOVAs revealed one statistically significant difference between first choice groups' perceptions of country image, but no other differences in any of the other country image variables. A summary of the findings from the US country competency image ANCOVA are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: ANCOVA Results for US Country Competency Image

Source	SS	df	MS	F
Age	0.00	1	0.00	.00
Ed. Attainment	2.00	1	527.20	3.66
Monthly Income	0.37	1	0.37	0.67
Destination Choice	4.01	2	2.00	3.66*
Error	275.47	504	.547	

* $p < 0.05$

The results indicated there was a significant effect for perceived US country competency image on destination choice after controlling for age, monthly household income, and educational attainment. However, the omega squared effect size value ($\omega^2 = .01$) suggested low practical significance. The results of a Bonferroni pairwise comparison are provided in Table 6.

Table 6: Bonferroni Comparison for US Country Competency Image

Comparisons	Mean difference	SE	95% CI	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
US vs. EU	0.13	0.08	-0.05	0.31
US vs. Other	0.25*	0.1	0.02	0.48
EU vs. Other	0.12	0.1	-0.12	0.35

* $p < 0.005$

The Bonferroni pairwise comparison revealed that the 'US' first choice group had a significantly more positive perception of 'US' competency than the 'Other' first choice group. There was no significant difference in this perception between any of the other first choice groups. These findings partially rejected Hypothesis II, suggesting no consistent, direct relationship between perceived country image and ideal first choice destination.

Hypothesis III - Respondents' selection of a destination as their ideal first choice for study abroad will vary significantly relative to their age, monthly household income, and educational attainment.

The demographic ANCOVAs also revealed one statistically significant difference in demographic characteristics among first choice groups. As presented in Table 7, the results indicated a significant difference in age among first choice groups after controlling for monthly household income, educational attainment. The omega squared effect size value ($\omega^2 = .04$) suggested low practical significance. A pairwise Bonferroni comparison was conducted to determine the nature of this difference, see Table 8.

Table 7: ANCOVA results for age

Source	SS	df	MS	F
Ed. Attainment	1298.66	1	1298.66	8.533*
Monthly Income	254.18	1	254.18	1.67
Destination Choice	2130.35	2	1065.18	7.00**
Error	39721.12	261	152.19	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 8. Bonferroni Comparison for Age

Comparisons	Mean age difference	SE	95% CI	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
US vs. EU	6.22***	1.68	2.17	10.26
US vs. Other	2.32	2.23	-3.05	7.69
EU vs. Other	-3.9	2.17	-9.12	1.33

*** $p < 0.005$

Bonferroni pairwise comparison revealed that older individuals are significantly more likely to select the US, while younger people are more likely to select a destination within the EU. No other significant differences existed between the groups. These findings partially refuted Hypothesis III.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the findings either reject or partially reject each of the three hypotheses. Regarding Hypothesis I, the distribution of ideal first choice destinations strongly skewed in favour of the US (44.2%) and member countries of the EU (40.3%). Very few first choices were for China (5.5%), Japan (4.8%) or other destinations (4.5%), with even fewer ‘don’t know/no answer’ (0.6%) responses. The results revealed little diversity among ideal first choice destinations for study abroad among Koreans. In refuting Hypothesis I, the results have shown very little interest among Koreans in East Asian destinations as an ideal first choice for study abroad. The results also reveal a strong preference for ‘the West’, a common term in Korean referred to as *seoyang* that consists the countries of the Anglosphere and Europe. This preference can be seen in the 84.5% of respondents that gave either the US or a member country of the EU as their first choice destination. This overwhelming focus on the US and EU as ideal first choice destinations comes in spite of growing numbers of mobile students from Asia-Pacific remaining within the region and the growing numbers of Korean international students studying in China (UNESCO, 2013).

The rejection of Hypothesis I could be due to culture. The answer to the question of an ideal study abroad destination may simply default to the US as a result of a cultural norm in Korea. In this case, rather than responding 'I don't know' or not giving an answer, respondents may naturally give the US as their ideal first choice. This explanation would also account for the fact that only a total of four respondents out of 620 replied that they did not know or did not give an answer. Findings from testing Hypotheses II and III also supported this notion that cultural norms, rather than individual perception, may play more predominantly into destination choice in Korea.

The results partially rejected Hypothesis II. Most Koreans who gave a destination as their ideal first choice were not more likely to have a more positive perception of that destination's country image. In one exception, the US first choice group did perceive 'US' competency image significantly more positively than those in the 'Other' group. Yet the effect size for perceived 'US' competency image was very low. Overall, the country image ANCOVA results indicated that perceived country image does not play a large part in ideal destination choice. This result suggests that other factors are more important for destination choice.

Partial rejection of Hypothesis II has a number of possible explanations. Positive perceptions of a monolithic 'West' might account for the large number of respondents providing the US or EU as their ideal first choice destination. Thus, there was no difference in perceived US country competence between the US and EU groups, but there was between the 'US' and 'Other' groups. It may be that those with the most positive view of 'the West' are more likely to select the US, those with negative views of 'the West' choose an Other country, and those with moderate views give an EU member country as their ideal first choice destination. Ultimately, however, the partial rejection of hypothesis II supports the notion that country image does not meaningfully sway the selection of an ideal first choice destination. Rather than individuals' perceptions of destination country image, other variables may hold more meaningful sway over destination choice.

Hypothesis III was also partially refuted by the findings. Factors such as monthly household income and educational attainment of respondents were not found to differ meaningfully between groups. Only age differed meaningfully between the US first choice group and EU first choice group. The effect size of age, though relatively larger than that of perceived US competency image, was still low. The results indicate younger people were more likely to give a member country of the EU as their ideal first choice, while their elders favoured the US.

The refutation of Hypothesis I and partial refutation of Hypotheses II and III reinforced the notion of a highly homogenous Korean society despite growing socioeconomic inequality (Byun & Kim, 2010). While monthly income and educational attainment do not impact ideal first choice destination, age does play a factor. This finding may be attributed to the rapid rate of development in Korea and the vastly different social realities of each generation. From the Korean War period, to the years of dictatorship, and most recently democracy, each generation has lived within a country with a very different international relationships. Younger people are more likely to have a more nuanced view of 'the West,' possibly explaining their increased likelihood to give an EU member country as a first choice destination. Varghese's (2008) model for phases of student mobility in higher education also provides a possible explanation for these findings.

Given the frozen state of the conflict of the Korean War and the continued presence of US military on the Korean peninsula, attitudes towards study abroad, particularly among the older generation, may still linger within a Cold War mindset, favouring the US as an ideal destination.

Overall, the findings discount the importance of individual perception of country image as an important determinant for ideal destination choice in study abroad, although this result may be limited to Korea. The findings support those of McMahon (1992), Zheng (2014), and Barnett, Lee, Jiang, & Park (2015) that point to the relationships between sending and receiving countries as a more important determinant in destination choice. Factors such as the state of country-level political, communicative and trade relations between host and destination countries may be more influential than push-pull factors in market for international students.

LIMITATIONS

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs (2008) data offers valuable information but presents some limitations. Comparisons between first choice groups as sub-samples are limited to the EU, the US, and Other, due to the low number of respondents who gave China or Japan as an ideal first choice destination. Furthermore, the narrow scope of country image data on just China, Japan and the US may obscure differences among first choice groups. Ideally, first choice groups would be limited to individual countries (rather than having been coded into supranational groupings such as the EU) and the country image data would include more than three countries.

In addition, the scope of this study is limited to Korea. On the one hand, Korea offers an interesting case for demand in study abroad, with its relatively high rate of tertiary student mobility; on the other hand, the findings from this study may be difficult to generalize to other contexts, particularly in other regions of the world or countries with lower degrees of interest in study abroad. Further work would be needed to examine the relationship between individual perception of country image and destination choice to provide more generalizable findings.

CONCLUSION

Attempts to influence country image are no small endeavours and, with regards to international mobility in higher education, may even be misguided. Rather than attempting to improve individual perceptions of country image or targeting particular demographic groups, policymakers and marketers may benefit from targeting source countries with whom their country already has a strong economic or political relationship. Particularly when recruiting students from Korea, a focus on building a positive country image may not be an efficient strategy. Further work is needed in other contexts to support the generalizability of the findings of this study and to further examine the role of international country level variables on destination choice. Such work would help to better anticipate global flows of international students and provide more insight into effective methods of marketing and recruitment of international students in the global market for higher education.

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APPENDIX

Character Factors

(1) Sense of personal connection (Co)

- a. “To what extent do you think [respondent’s country] shares similar values and a way of life with the following countries?”
- b. “Please rate your feelings toward the following, with one hundred meaning a very warm, favorable feeling, zero meaning a very cold, unfavorable feeling, and fifty meaning not particularly warm or cold.”

(2) Diplomatic importance (D)

- a. “Please tell me if you think each of the following are having a mainly positive or mainly negative influence in Asia”
- b. “[country] uses diplomacy to resolve key problems in Asia.”
- c. “[country] respects the sovereignty of other Asian countries.”
- d. “[country] builds trust and cooperation among Asian countries.”
- e. “[country] exercises leadership in international institutions like the UN and the World Trade Organization.”

(3) Political system (P)

- a. “[country] respects human rights and the rule of law.”
- b. “The country has a political system that serves the needs of its people.”

(4) Culture (Cu)

- a. “Now, for each of the following countries, tell me whether you think the spreading of their cultural influence in Asia is mainly a good thing or mainly a bad thing.”

Country image and ideal destination choice in study abroad

- b. "I would like you to think about how much influence the popular culture of [country] has had on [respondent's country's] popular culture."
- c. "Please tell me how important, if at all, it is for children to learn the following languages in order to succeed in the future."
- d. "How often do you watch movies and television, or listen to music from [country]?"
- e. "The country has an appealing popular culture."
- f. "The country has a rich cultural heritage."
- g. "The country is an attractive destination for international tourism."
- f. "The country has developed religious traditions that have been influential in other parts of the world."

Competency factors

(5) Economy (Ec)

- a. "Please indicate how important you think economic relations such as trade and investment with each of the following countries are to [respondent's country's] economy?"
- b. "Please indicate how important you think economic relations such as trade and investment with each of the following countries are to [respondent's country's] economy?"
- c. "[country] helps other Asian countries develop their economies."
- d. "The country has an internationally competitive economy."
- e. "The country provides many economic opportunities for its workforce."
- f. "The country has a great entrepreneurial spirit."
- g. "The country has leading multinational companies."

(6) Military prowess (M)

- a. "Please rate the following countries according to their military strength in Asia on a scale of 0 to 10?"

(7) Education and technology (Ed)

- a. "The country has a highly educated population."
- b. "The country possesses advanced science and technology."