



Revisiting Soft Power: How Expectations, Experiences, and Media Shape perceptions of Korea's Image Among International Students

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, South Korea has attracted growing global attention through the expansion of the Korean Wave (Hallyu), significantly shaping international students' perceptions of Korea's image prior to direct experience. However, these perceptions are not static and may evolve after arrival as individuals engage with the realities of everyday life. Revisiting the concept of soft power, this study examines how expectation gaps, interpretation of negative experience and social media depiction inaccuracy shape international students' perceptions of Korea's image across three levels: personal (micro), cultural (Hallyu), and global (macro). Using a quantitative research design, data were collected from international students in Korea and analyzed using regression analysis to explore the relationships among key variables. The findings reveal that expectation gaps negatively influence perceptions of Korea's image across all levels, while interpretation of negative experiences play a significant role in shaping personal-level changes in perceptions. In contrast, perceived social media depiction inaccuracy exerts a stronger influence on cultural and global perceptions, with lived experiences showing comparatively limited effects at these broader levels.

These results suggest that perceptions of Korea's image are formed through distinct mechanisms: personal-level perception change is primarily experience-driven, whereas cultural and global perceptions are largely shaped by mediated representations and prior expectations. This study contributes to the soft power literature by proposing a multi-level framework of perception of Korea's image formation and offers practical implications for policymakers and educational institutions seeking to manage Korea's international image and enhance international student experiences.

1. Introduction

In recent years, South Korea has gained significant global visibility, largely driven by the expansion of the Korean Wave (Hallyu), including K-pop, K-dramas, films, and digital media content. This phenomenon has increased global engagement with Korean culture through streaming platforms and social media, strengthening Korea's cultural influence and soft power and enhancing its attractiveness as a destination for international students (Jin, 2024; Sunyogita, 2024). This growing soft power shapes international students' perceptions even before arrival, as exposure to Hallyu often creates favorable and sometimes idealized images of Korea as modern, technologically advanced, and

culturally vibrant (Jin & Yoon, 2016; Roll, 2021). These pre-arrival perceptions form expectations that may later be reinforced or challenged through lived experiences in the host country.

Recent empirical evidence underscores the importance of this issue. A survey reported by Pyo Kyung-min shows that K-culture is a major driver of international interest in Korea, with many respondents perceiving K-content as partly reflective of real life. This suggests that media representations shape both attraction and expectations, while gaps between mediated portrayals and actual experiences highlight the need to examine how these expectations are adjusted after direct contact. These findings support the

relevance of this study and the need to investigate how international students' perceptions of Korea's image are formed and transformed.

Upon arrival in Korea, international students encounter everyday social, cultural, and institutional environments that may confirm or challenge their preexisting beliefs. This transition is critical in understanding changes in perceptions of Korea's image. A key factor influencing this process is the expectation gap, defined as the discrepancy between pre-arrival expectations and actual experiences. When experiences align with or exceed expectations, students are more likely to maintain or develop positive perceptions, whereas unmet expectations may result in dissatisfaction and negative evaluations (Wang et al., 2021; Schiebler et al., 2025). In addition, interpretations of negative experiences play a central role in shaping perception change. Individuals actively assign meaning to their experiences, and similar situations may result in different evaluations depending on cognitive framing and emotional responses (Ward & Geeraert, 2016; Malay et al., 2023). In the digital era, social media further intensifies this process by disseminating curated and sometimes idealized representations of Korean society. While such platforms contribute to forming expectations, perceived social media depiction inaccuracy may create discrepancies between online portrayals and real-life experiences, leading to a reassessment of Korea's image (Jin & Yoon, 2016; Ko & Kim, 2024).

In this study, perceptions of Korea's image are conceptualized as a multi-dimensional construct operating across three levels: personal (micro-level), cultural (Hallyu-related), and global or diplomatic (macro-level). Personal-level perception refers to changes in individuals' evaluations of Korea based on their lived experiences, cultural perception relates to attitudes toward Korean culture and Hallyu, and global perception reflects broader evaluations of Korea's international image and diplomatic presence. This multi-level approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of how perceptions are formed and transformed.

Despite growing scholarly attention, existing research has largely examined international students' perceptions through the lenses of intercultural adaptation, adjustment processes, and individual experiences, while paying limited attention to how experiential and media-related factors jointly shape perceptions of a host country (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Malay et al., 2023). Consequently, the combined influence of lived experiences and media-generated expectations on international students' perceptions remains insufficiently understood. Moreover, previous studies have generally treated country image as a unified construct, offering limited insight into how perceptions may differ across personal, cultural, and global dimensions.

To address this gap, the present study develops and empirically tests a multilevel framework that integrates experi-

ential and media related determinants of perception change among international students in South Korea. As international students represent a significant audience of Korea's cultural diplomacy and global image building efforts, understanding how they evaluate and reinterpret Korea after arrival has become increasingly relevant for both theoretical and practical purposes. Specifically, the study examines expectation gap, interpretations of negative experiences, and perceived social media depiction inaccuracy as key factors shaping perceptions of Korea. Furthermore, the study conceptualizes Korea's image as a multidimensional construct comprising personal perceptions derived from everyday experiences, cultural perceptions associated with Hallyu and Korean culture, and global perceptions related to Korea's international reputation and diplomatic standing. Examining these three dimensions provides a more comprehensive understanding of Korea's image by recognizing that perceptions may develop and change differently across personal, cultural, and global levels. Moreover, by collecting data from international students who have lived and studied in Korea, this research moves beyond pre-arrival impressions and investigates how actual experiences and direct engagement with Korean society influence perception formation and transformation. By integrating experiential and media related factors within a single framework and examining their effects across multiple dimensions of country image, this study extends existing research on international students, country image, and soft power while offering deeper insights into how expectations, lived experiences, and media representations jointly shape perceptions of Korea, thereby providing practical insights for policymakers and educational institutions seeking to enhance international student experiences and effectively manage Korea's global image.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Perception of Korea's Image formation Among International Students in a Digital Context

The formation of international students' perceptions of Korea's image has become increasingly complex in the context of globalization and digital communication. As individuals move across borders for education, they develop perceptions of host countries based on a combination of prior expectations and direct experiences, which influence their personal satisfaction and attitudes toward the host society and culture. Existing studies suggest that perception formation is shaped by the interaction between pre-arrival expectations formed through media exposure, word-of-mouth, and prior knowledge and post-arrival experiences such as academic engagement, social interaction, and cultural adaptation (Malay et al., 2023; Zhao & Bava Harji, 2024). These perceptions are continuously evaluated and adjusted over time, highlighting their dynamic and evolving nature.

More recent research emphasizes the growing importance of digital environments in shaping country image perceptions even before physical mobility occurs. Social media and transnational media flows provide continuous exposure to curated and often idealized representations, significantly influencing expectations (Sevin et al., 2020). Perception formation is therefore dynamic and cyclical, as mediated images and lived experiences interact to reshape individual understanding (Lee & Kim, 2022). In the Korean context, exposure to Hallyu-related content plays a key role in shaping initial perceptions, which are later reassessed through real-life experiences (Jin & Yoon, 2016; Nam, 2024).

Building on these perspectives, this study examines how international students' perceptions of Korea are shaped by three key factors: expectation gaps (differences between expectations and actual experiences), interpretations of negative experiences (how individuals make sense of their lived experiences), and perceived social media depiction inaccuracy (the extent to which online content is seen as unrealistic). Using quantitative analysis, it investigates how these factors influence perception changes at the personal level, as well as perceptions of Korea's cultural image (Hallyu) and its global and diplomatic image.

2.2. Determinants of Perceptions of Korea's Image: Expectation Gap, Interpretations of Negative Experiences, and Media Influence

Perceptions of Korea's image change among international students are shaped by cognitive, experiential, and media-related factors, particularly expectation gaps, interpretations of negative experiences, and perceived social media depiction inaccuracy. Existing literature highlights the expectation gap the difference between pre-arrival expectations and actual experiences as a key determinant, showing that unmet expectations often lead to negative evaluations, while in some cases prompting cognitive adjustment and deeper cultural understanding (Wang et al., 2021; Schiebler et al., 2025).

In addition, prior research emphasizes the role of interpreting negative experiences, as individuals actively construct meaning based on their cultural background, prior knowledge, and emotional responses, leading to varied perception outcomes (Deardorff, 2017; Ward et al., 2016). Alongside these experiential factors, media influence has become increasingly significant, with social media presenting selective and idealized representations that shape expectations and interpretations (Jin & Yoon, 2016; Roll, 2021). Perceived inaccuracies between online portrayals and real-life experiences may further prompt individuals to reassess both their perceptions of Korea and the credibility of digital information (Appel et al., 2020; Ko & Kim, 2024).

Building on this literature, the study examines expectation gaps, interpretations of negative experiences, and per-

ceived social media depiction inaccuracy as key determinants that interact to shape perception outcomes across multiple levels.

2.3. Multi-Level Dimensions of Perceptions of Korea's Image: Personal, Cultural (Hallyu), and Global Perspectives

Perceptions of Korea's image among international students are increasingly understood as multi-dimensional, extending beyond individual attitudes to include cultural and global evaluations. Rather than a single construct, perception reflects different levels shaped by personal experiences, cultural engagement, and broader views of the host country's international image. At the personal level, perception is closely related to individual satisfaction, emotional responses, and everyday experiences such as academic life, social interaction, and adaptation challenges (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Ward et al., 2020). At the cultural level, perceptions are shaped by engagement with the host country's culture, including traditions, values, and popular culture. In the Korean context, Hallyu plays a key role in shaping cultural image, as international students interpret Korean society through media and cultural products (Jin & Yoon, 2016; Sun, 2024). At the global level, perception extends to broader evaluations of Korea's international image, including reputation, soft power, and diplomatic standing, influenced by both media representations and lived experiences (Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2020; Nye, 2024). These three levels are interconnected and continuously evolving: personal experiences influence cultural understanding, and together they shape global evaluations. Digital environments and social media further play a crucial role by shaping and circulating perceptions across all levels (Graan, 2021; Jin, 2024). Building on this multi-level perspective, this study conceptualizes perception outcomes across three dimensions: personal-level perception change (DV1), perceptions of Korea's cultural image (Hallyu) (DV2), and perceptions of Korea's global and diplomatic image (DV3), enabling a more comprehensive analysis of perception formation.

2.4. Research Gap

Despite a growing body of literature on country image and international experiences, several gaps remain. First, existing studies largely treat perception as a single dimensional construct, with limited attention to multi-level approaches integrating personal, cultural, and global perspectives, thereby restricting a comprehensive understanding of how perceptions evolve. Second, prior research often focuses on individual determinants in isolation, such as expectation gaps or media influence, rather than examining their combined effects particularly the interaction between expectation gaps, interpretations of negative experiences, and perceived social media depiction inaccuracy. Third, alt-

though international students represent a significant and growing population, research on their perception formation in the Korean context remains limited, despite their unique role in interpreting cultural environments. Finally, existing literature tends to treat digital influences and lived experiences as separate domains, overlooking their interaction in shaping perceptions within digitally mediated contexts.

To address these gaps, this study proposes an integrated multi-level framework examining perception change across personal, cultural, and global dimensions, while incorporating both experiential and media-related factors. By focusing on expectation gaps, interpretations of negative experiences, and perceived social media depiction inaccuracy, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how international students form and adjust their perceptions of Korea's images.

3. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

This study draws on Expectation Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) and the Social Construction of Reality (SCR) perspective to explain how international students form and revise perceptions of Korea's image after studying and living in South Korea. These perspectives are particularly relevant because perceptions of a host country emerge not only from direct experiences but also from the ways individuals evaluate and interpret those experiences. Together, they provide a framework for understanding how expectation gaps, interpretations of negative experiences, and perceived social media depiction inaccuracy influence perceptions of Korea at the personal, cultural, and global levels.

Expectation Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) provides the primary foundation for this study. According to EDT, individuals evaluate outcomes by comparing actual experiences with prior expectations (Oliver, 1980). Positive evaluations occur when experiences meet or exceed expectations, while negative disconfirmation occurs when experiences fall short of expectations (Oliver, 1980; Bhattacharjee, 2001). For international students, pre-arrival expectations serve as standards against which life in South Korea is assessed. Therefore, larger expectation gaps are likely to result in less favorable perceptions of Korea's personal, cultural, and global image. While EDT explains how evaluations are formed, the Social Construction of Reality (SCR) perspective explains how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their experiences. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), reality is socially constructed through interpretation. Thus, individuals facing similar situations may develop different perceptions depending on how they interpret their experiences. International students who view adaptation challenges more positively may maintain more favorable evaluations of Korea. Therefore, interpretations of

negative experiences are expected to influence perceptions of Korea's image across personal, cultural, and global dimensions. The SCR perspective also explains the role of perceived social media depiction inaccuracy. Before arrival, students often form impressions of Korea through social media, which may present selective or idealized representations. When students perceive discrepancies between these portrayals and their actual experiences, they may reassess their prior beliefs and revise their evaluations of Korea. Consequently, perceived social media depiction inaccuracy is expected to negatively influence perceptions of Korea's image.

Integrating EDT and SCR, this study argues that perceptions of Korea's image develop through a process of expectation formation, evaluation, and interpretation. Students first form expectations about Korea before arrival and then evaluate their experiences through the disconfirmation process described by EDT. They subsequently interpret their experiences and the accuracy of the information that shaped their expectations. These interpretive processes, explained by SCR, influence perceptions of Korea's image. Therefore, expectation gaps, interpretations of negative experiences, and perceived social media depiction inaccuracy are expected to shape perceptions of Korea's image at the personal, cultural, and global levels. Based on this theoretical framework, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Expectation gap is negatively associated with personal perception changes of Korea's image.

H2: Expectation gap is negatively associated with perceptions of Korea's cultural image (Hallyu).

H3: Expectation gap is negatively associated with perceptions of Korea's global and diplomatic image.

H4: More positive interpretations of negative experiences are associated with more positive personal perception changes of Korea's image.

H5: More positive interpretations of negative experiences are associated with more positive perceptions of Korea's cultural image (Hallyu).

H6: More positive interpretations of negative experiences are associated with more positive perceptions of Korea's global and diplomatic image.

H7: Perceived social media depiction inaccuracy is negatively associated with personal perception changes of Korea's image.

H8: Perceived social media depiction inaccuracy is negatively associated with perceptions of Korea's cultural image (Hallyu).

H9: Perceived social media depiction inaccuracy is negatively associated with perceptions of Korea's global and diplomatic image.

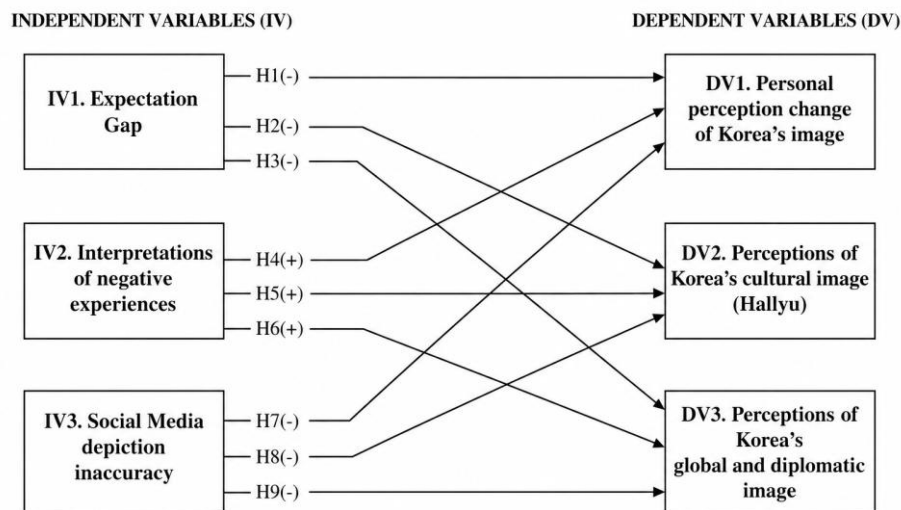


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey approach to examine the determinants of perception of Korea's image formation among international students in Korea. A deductive approach is employed, whereby hypotheses are developed based on existing literature and theoretical foundations and subsequently tested using empirical data. To examine the proposed hypotheses, ordered logistic regression models are applied to analyze the relationships between the independent variables and multiple dimensions of perception outcomes. Three separate models are estimated corresponding to the dependent variables. Model 1 examines personal perception changes of Korea's Image at the individual level, Model 2 analyzes Perceptions of Korea's Cultural Image (Hallyu influence), and Model 3 focuses on Perceptions of Korea's Global and Diplomatic Image. This approach enables a comparative analysis of how different factors influence perception of Korea's image across multiple levels.

The key independent variables included in the analysis are expectation gap, interpretations of negative experiences, and perceived social media depiction inaccuracy. In addition, control variables such as age, gender, country of origin, pre arrival image, length of stay in Korea, and discrimination experience are incorporated to account for potential confounding effects. The inclusion of these control variables enhances the robustness of the analysis and ensures more reliable estimation of the relationships between the key variables.

4.2. Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through a structured survey administered to international students currently re-

siding in South Korea. The target population comprised students from diverse national and cultural backgrounds who had direct experience with Korean society. A questionnaire was developed to measure all variables included in the conceptual framework, encompassing demographic characteristics, pre arrival perceptions, lived experiences in Korea, and post arrival perception changes. Several key constructs were operationalized using single item indicators designed to capture respondents' overall evaluations of specific perceptions and experiences. This approach was considered appropriate because the study focused on broad evaluative judgments rather than complex latent psychological constructs requiring multiple item scales. Accordingly, the survey items directly assessed respondents' perceptions of expectation experience discrepancies, interpretations of negative experiences, perceived accuracy of social media portrayals, and evaluations of Korea's image. To ensure meaningful assessment of these perceptions, only respondents with sufficient experience living in Korea were included in the study. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were collected anonymously to ensure confidentiality and minimize potential response bias.

4.3. Dependable Variable

Consistent with this study's focus on understanding how expectations, lived experiences, and media influences shape perceptions of Korea, Korea's image is conceptualized as a multidimensional phenomenon represented by three distinct but related dependent variables: personal perception changes of Korea's image, perceptions of Korea's cultural image (Hallyu), and perceptions of Korea's global and diplomatic image. The first dependent variable, personal perception changes of Korea's image, measures whether international students' overall perceptions of South Korea

have changed since studying in Korea. It was measured using the survey question, "Since studying in Korea, has your perception of the country changed?" using a three-point ordinal scale, where higher values indicate a more positive perception change. The second dependent variable, perceptions of Korea's cultural image (Hallyu), assesses respondents' evaluations of Korea's cultural soft power, particularly Hallyu and traditional culture. It was measured using the survey item, "How would you now rate the following aspects of Korean soft power? Cultural influence (Hallyu, traditional culture)," using a five-point Likert scale, where higher scores indicate more positive perceptions. The third dependent variable, perceptions of Korea's global and diplomatic image, captures respondents' evaluations of Korea's international presence and diplomatic influence. It was measured using the survey item, "How would you now rate the following aspects of Korean soft power? Korea's global presence and diplomacy," using the same five-point Likert scale, where higher values indicate more favorable perceptions. Consistent with the study's multidimensional conceptualization of Korea's image, the dependent variables were operationalized as single-item indicators designed to capture respondents' overall evaluations of Korea across personal, cultural, and global dimensions.

4.4. Independent Variable

This study includes three key independent variables: expectation gap, interpretations of negative experiences, and perceived social media depiction inaccuracy. Expectation gap measures the extent to which students' actual experiences in Korea compare with expectations formed prior to arrival and was assessed using the survey question, "How did life in Korea compare to what you expected from social media?" Responses were measured on a five-point scale, with higher values indicating experiences that exceeded prior expectations. Interpretations of negative experiences capture how experiences such as alienation, discrimination, or cultural shock influence respondents' perceptions of Korea and were measured using the question, "If you have experienced any form of alienation, discrimination, or cultural shock, how has this affected your perception of Korea?" Higher values indicate more positive interpretations of such experiences. Perceived social media depiction inaccuracy assesses the extent to which respondents perceive discrepancies between social media portrayals of Korea and their actual experiences after arrival. It was measured using the survey question, "After coming to Korea, how accurately did social media portray Korean society and culture?" Responses were coded so that higher values indicate greater perceived inaccuracy in social media representations. Together, these independent variables capture expectation-based, experiential, and media-related factors that may influence international students' perceptions of Korea, and were operationalized as single-item indicators consistent

with the study's focus on respondents' overall evaluations of each construct.

4.5. Control Variable

Several control variables were included to account for potential confounding effects. These variables include age, gender, nationality, duration of stay in Korea, pre-arrival image of Korea, and discrimination experience. Age and gender were included to control for demographic differences among respondents. Nationality was included to account for potential cultural and regional variations in perceptions. Duration of stay was controlled because longer exposure to Korean society may influence perception formation. Pre-arrival image of Korea was included to account for respondents' initial perceptions before arrival, while discrimination experience was controlled because negative experiences may affect evaluations of Korea's image. These variables were included in all regression models to improve the robustness of the analysis.

4.6. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using ordered logistic regression to examine the relationships between the independent and dependent variables and to test the proposed hypotheses. This method was selected because all three dependent variables were measured on ordinal scales, making ordered logistic regression appropriate for accounting for the ordered nature of the response categories. The analysis was conducted using STATA statistical software. Three separate ordered logistic regression models were estimated corresponding to the three dimensions of Korea's image: personal perception changes of Korea's image, perceptions of Korea's cultural image (Hallyu), and perceptions of Korea's global and diplomatic image. The key independent variables included expectation gap, interpretations of negative experiences, and perceived social media depiction inaccuracy. To account for potential confounding effects, the models controlled for perceived discrimination, pre-arrival image of Korea, duration of stay, gender, nationality, and age. Categorical variables were converted into dummy variables prior to analysis. In addition to reporting regression coefficients (β), odds ratios (ORs) were calculated and reported to facilitate interpretation of effect sizes. An odds ratio greater than 1 indicates increased odds of reporting a higher category of the dependent variable, whereas an odds ratio less than 1 indicates reduced odds. This analytical approach enables the systematic examination of how experiential and media-related factors influence perceptions of Korea across personal, cultural, and global dimensions.

5. Results

5.1. Descriptive Analysis

A total of 299 survey responses were analyzed, representing a diverse sample of international students in Korea.

The sample is predominantly male (approximately 60 percent), while female respondents account for about 40 percent. The largest national group is from Nepal, followed by Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Uzbekistan, and India, reflecting a strong concentration of South Asian respondents. A majority of participants are enrolled in bachelor’s degree programs, with a smaller but notable proportion pursuing master’s degrees. Regarding duration of stay, approximately 40 percent of respondents have lived in Korea for more than two years, while nearly 29 percent arrived within the previous six months, capturing both long-term and recently arrived students. Overall, respondents reported low to moderate pre-arrival familiarity with Korean culture, with social media serving as a major source shaping initial perceptions. Experiences of social adjustment showed noticeable variation, with most respondents reporting neutral to moderate adjustment experiences, while some faced greater difficulties. Collectively, the sample reflects diverse backgrounds and experiences, providing a strong basis for analyzing how expectation gap, interpretations of negative experiences,

and perceived social media depiction *inaccuracy influence changes in perceptions of Korea’s image.*

5.2. Ordered Logistic Regression Analysis

To examine the determinants of international students’ perceptions of Korea’s image, ordered logistic regression analyses were conducted across three models representing different levels of perception: Perceptions of Korea’s Image (Personal level), Perceptions of Korea’s Cultural Image (Hallyu), Perceptions of Korea’s Global and Diplomatic Image .The models include key independent variables expectation gap, interpretations of negative experiences, and Perceived social media depiction inaccuracy along with control variables such as gender, age, country of origin, duration of stay, pre arrival image and discrimination experience. All three models are statistically significant based on likelihood ratio tests ($p < 0.001$), indicating overall model adequacy. The explanatory power of the models is moderate, suggesting that the included variables capture meaningful variation in perception outcomes.

Table 1. Ordered logistic regression results for personal perception change toward Korea

Variable Type	Variables	Coefficient (β)	Odds Ratio (OR)	SE	Significance
Dependent Variable	Personal perception changes of Korea's image				
Independent Variables	Expectation Gap	-0.646	0.524	0.191	***
	Interpretation of Negative Experiences (No impact)	1.208	3.348	0.349	***
	Interpretation of Negative Experiences (Positive impact)	2.074	7.954	0.439	***
	Perceived Social Media Depiction Inaccuracy	-0.341	0.711	0.176	†
Control Variables	Discrimination Experience (Occasionally)	0.327	1.387	0.329	n.s.
	Discrimination Experience (Frequently)	0.636	1.889	0.465	n.s.
	Pre-arrival Image	0.054	1.056	0.153	n.s.
	Duration of Stay (6–12 months)	0.087	1.091	0.539	n.s.
	Duration of Stay (1–2 years)	0.208	1.231	0.471	n.s.
	Duration of Stay (>2 years)	-0.188	0.828	0.399	n.s.
	Gender (Female)	-0.122	0.885	0.282	n.s.
	Country (India)	0.918	2.504	1.184	n.s.
	Country (Nepal)	0.519	1.680	0.409	n.s.
	Country (Other)	-0.643	0.528	0.563	n.s.
	Country (Sri Lanka)	-0.774	0.461	0.552	n.s.
Age	-0.048	0.953	0.235	n.s.	
Model Statistics	Observations (N)	264			
	Log Likelihood	-211.72			
	LR χ^2 (16)	84.91			***
	Pseudo R ²	0.167			

Notes *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, † $p < 0.010$, n.s= not significant

5.3. Model 1: Personal Perception Changes of Korea’s Image (Micro Level)

Table 1 presents the results of the ordered logistic regression analysis for Perceptions of Korea’s Image change

at the micro level. Model 1 is statistically significant (LR $\chi^2 = 84.91$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the model provides an adequate fit to the data.

As shown in Table 1, expectation gap has a statistically significant negative association with perception of Korea’s image change ($\beta = -0.646, p < 0.01$). This indicates that when students’ experiences fall short of their prior expectations, their perceptions tend to shift in a negative direction. Interpretation of negative experiences emerges as the strongest predictor of perception change. Respondents who report that such experiences had no impact on their views ($\beta = 1.208, p < 0.01$) or even a positive impact ($\beta = 2.074, p < 0.001$) are significantly more likely to hold favorable perceptions compared to those reporting negative impacts. This pattern suggests that subjective evaluation of experiences plays a central role in shaping individual-level perception outcomes. Perceived social media depiction inaccuracy shows a marginally significant negative association ($\beta = -0.341, p < 0.10$), indicating that perceived inconsistencies between media portrayals and actual experiences are weakly associated with less favorable perception changes.

In contrast, pre-arrival image and all control variables (gender, age, country of origin, duration of stay, and discrimination experience) are not statistically significant. This

suggests that individual perception change is primarily associated with experiential and cognitive factors rather than demographic characteristics or prior impressions.

The odds ratio estimates support these findings. Expectation gap reduced the likelihood of positive perception changes toward Korea (OR = 0.52, $p = .001$), whereas interpreting negative experiences as having no impact (OR = 3.35, $p = .001$) or as having a positive impact (OR = 7.95, $p < .001$) significantly increased the likelihood of positive perception changes. Perceived social media depiction inaccuracy showed a marginally significant negative effect (OR = 0.71, $p = .053$), while none of the control variables were statistically significant.

5.4 Model 2: perceptions of Korea’s cultural image (Hallyu)

Table 2 presents the results of the ordered logistic regression analysis perceptions of Korea’s cultural image (Hallyu) influence at the cultural level. Model 2 is statistically significant (LR $\chi^2 = 48.77, p < 0.001$), indicating that the model provides an adequate fit to the data.

Table 2. Hypothesis testing results for model 1

Hypothesis	Relationship	Result
H1	Expectation gap is negatively associated with Personal perception changes of Korea’s image.	Supported
H4	More positive interpretations of negative experiences are associated with more positive personal perception changes of Korea’s image.	Supported
H7	Perceived Social media depiction inaccuracy is negatively associated with personal perception changes of Korea’s image	Partially Supported

Model 2 results show a differentiated pattern of relationships. Among the main independent variables, expectation gap is the only statistically significant predictor of perceptions of Korea’s cultural image (Hallyu), exhibiting a negative effect ($\beta = -0.43, p < 0.05$). This indicates that unmet expectations are associated with less favorable perceptions of Korea’s cultural image. In contrast, interpretations of negative experiences and Perceived Social Media depiction inaccuracy are not statistically significant. Compared to those who say negative experiences worsened their perception, those who say experiences had no or even positive impact do not significantly differ in their evaluation of Hallyu. These findings suggest that, among the focal explanatory variables, expectation gap is the primary factor influencing Hallyu perceptions.

Regarding control variables, pre-arrival image of Korea has a statistically significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.35, p < 0.05$), indicating that students with more favorable prior images of Korea tend to perceive Hallyu more positively. Gender is also significant ($\beta = 0.74, p < 0.01$), with female respondents reporting stronger perceived Hallyu influence than males. Other control variables, including discrimination experience and duration of stay, are not statistically significant. Overall, the findings suggest that perceptions of

Hallyu are shaped primarily by expectation gaps and pre-existing cognitive and demographic factors, rather than by interpretations of lived experiences or perceived social media depiction inaccuracy.

The odds ratio estimates further support these findings. Expectation gap significantly reduced the likelihood of reporting favorable perceptions of Korea’s cultural image (OR = 0.65, $p = .011$), indicating that students whose experiences fell short of expectations were less likely to maintain positive perceptions of Hallyu. Conversely, a more positive pre-arrival image of Korea increased the likelihood of favorable cultural perceptions (OR = 1.42, $p = .014$), while female respondents were more likely than male respondents to report positive perceptions of Korean cultural influence (OR = 2.11, $p = .005$). None of the other independent variables or control variables were statistically significant.

5.5. Model 3: Perceptions of Korea’s Global and Diplomatic Image. (Macro Level)

Table 3 presents the results of the ordered logistic regression analysis for perception of Korea’s global and diplomatic image at the macro level. Model 3 is statistically

significant (LR $\chi^2 = 67.82, p < 0.001$), indicating that the model provides an adequate fit to the data.

Table 3. Ordered logistic regression results for perceptions of Korea’s cultural image (Hallyu)

Variable Type	Variables	Coefficient (β)	Odds Ratio (OR)	SE	Significance
Dependent Variable	Perceptions of Korea's Cultural Image (Hallyu)				
Independent Variables	Expectation Gap	-0.435	0.647	0.172	*
	Interpretation of Negative Experiences (No impact)	-0.001	0.999	0.347	n.s.
	Interpretation of Negative Experiences (Positive impact)	-0.439	0.645	0.395	n.s.
Control Variables	Perceived Social Media Depiction Inaccuracy	-0.092	0.912	0.163	n.s.
	Discrimination Experience (Occasionally)	-0.068	0.935	0.297	n.s.
	Discrimination Experience (Frequently)	-0.237	0.789	0.429	n.s.
	Pre-arrival Image	0.354	1.425	0.145	*
	Duration of Stay (6–12 months)	-0.368	0.692	0.487	n.s.
	Duration of Stay (1–2 years)	-0.230	0.794	0.421	n.s.
	Duration of Stay (>2 years)	-0.552	0.576	0.370	n.s.
	Gender (Female)	0.745	2.106	0.265	**
	Country (India)	0.205	1.228	0.856	n.s.
	Country (Nepal)	0.238	1.268	0.388	n.s.
	Country (Other)	0.794	2.212	0.552	n.s.
	Country (Sri Lanka/Uzbekistan)	0.011	1.011	0.558	n.s.
	Age	-0.307	0.736	0.226	n.s.
Model Statistics	Observations (N)	262			
	Log Likelihood	-272.60			
	LR χ^2 (16)	48.77			***
	Pseudo R ²	0.082			

Notes *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, † $p < 0.010$, n.s.= not significant

Table 4. Hypothesis testing results for model 1

Hypothesis	Relationship	Result
H2	Expectation gap is negatively associated with perceptions of Korea’s cultural image (Hallyu).	Supported
H5	More positive interpretations of negative experiences are associated with more positive changes in perceptions of Korea’s cultural image	Not Supported
H8	Perceived social media depiction Inaccuracy is negatively associated with perceptions of Korea’s cultural image	Not Supported

Model 3 results further reinforce differences across perception levels. Among the main independent variables, expectation gap has a statistically significant negative effect on perceptions of Korea’s global and diplomatic image ($\beta = -0.36, p < 0.05$) and indicating that unmet expectations reduce favorable macro-level perceptions. Perceived Social Media Depiction Inaccuracy also shows a statistically significant negative effect ($\beta = -0.45, p < 0.01$) and suggesting that perceiving Korea as misrepresented in social media is associated with lower evaluations of Korea’s global and diplomatic image. In contrast, interpretations of negative experiences are not statistically significant. These findings suggest that macro-level perceptions are shaped more by expectation-related and media-related factors than by interpretations of lived experiences.

Regarding control variables, pre-arrival image has a statistically significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.36, p < 0.01$), indicating that students with more favorable prior impressions of Korea tend to hold more positive perceptions of Korea’s global and diplomatic image. Duration of stay is also statistically significant ($\beta = -1.42, p < 0.001$), with respondents who have stayed in Korea for more than two years reporting less favorable evaluations, suggesting that extended exposure may lead to more critical or nuanced assessments. Other control variables, including gender, country of origin, and discrimination experience, are not statistically significant. Overall, the findings indicate that perceptions of Korea’s global and diplomatic image are influenced primarily by expectation gaps and perceived social media depiction inaccuracy, while pre-arrival image

and duration of stay also play important roles as control variables.

Table 5. Ordered logistic regression results for model 3

Variable Type	Variables	Coefficient (β)	Odds Ratio (OR)	SE	Significance
Dependent Variable	Perceptions of Korea's Global and Diplomatic Image				
Independent Variables	Expectation Gap	-0.364	0.695	0.175	*
	Interpretation of Negative Experiences (No impact)	0.049	1.050	0.331	n.s.
	Interpretation of Negative Experiences (Positive impact)	0.046	1.047	0.371	n.s.
Control Variables	Perceived Social Media Depiction Inaccuracy	-0.447	0.640	0.163	**
	Discrimination Experience (Occasionally)	-0.193	0.825	0.291	n.s.
	Discrimination Experience (Frequently)	-0.078	0.925	0.424	n.s.
	Pre-arrival Image	0.359	1.432	0.138	**
	Duration of Stay (6–12 months)	-0.734	0.480	0.488	n.s.
	Duration of Stay (1–2 years)	-0.534	0.586	0.416	n.s.
	Duration of Stay (>2 years)	-1.423	0.241	0.365	***
	Gender (Female)	-0.018	0.983	0.255	n.s.
	Country (India)	1.090	2.973	0.808	n.s.
	Country (Nepal)	0.346	1.413	0.357	n.s.
	Country (Other)	0.014	1.014	0.536	n.s.
	Country (Sri Lanka/Uzbekistan)	-0.227	0.797	0.520	n.s.
	Age	0.258	1.295	0.215	n.s.
Model Statistics	Observations (N)	260			
	Log Likelihood	-280.04			
	LR χ^2 (16)	67.82			
	Pseudo R ²	0.108			

Notes *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, † $p < 0.010$, n.s = not significant

The odds ratio estimates further support these findings. Expectation gap significantly reduced the likelihood of reporting favorable perceptions of Korea’s global and diplomatic image (OR = 0.70, $p = .038$), while perceived social media depiction inaccuracy was associated with 36% lower odds of positive evaluations (OR = 0.64, $p = .006$). Conversely, a more favorable pre-arrival image increased the

likelihood of positive perceptions (OR = 1.43, $p = .009$). Respondents who had resided in Korea for more than two years were significantly less likely to report favorable perceptions of Korea’s global and diplomatic image (OR = 0.24, $p < .001$). None of the remaining independent variables or control variables were statistically significant

Table 6. Hypothesis testing results for model 2

Hypothesis	Relationship	Result
H3	Expectation gap is negatively associated with perceptions of Korea’s global and diplomatic image.	Supported
H6	More positive interpretations of negative experiences are associated with more positive changes in perceptions of Korea’s global and diplomatic image.	Not Supported
H9	Perceived social media depiction inaccuracy is negatively associated with perceptions of Korea’s global and diplomatic image	Supported

6. Conclusion

6.1. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that international students’ perceptions of Korea’s image are associated with through a multi-level and differentiated process rather than a single uniform mechanism. By examining three dimensions personal-level perception changes, perceptions of Korea’s cul-

tural image (Hallyu), and perceptions of Korea’s global and diplomatic image. These findings reveal that different factors are associated with across distinct dimensions of perception formation.

At the individual level, perception change is primarily associated with by expectation gap and interpretations of negative experiences, highlighting the importance of cognitive evaluation and meaning-making in shaping personal

perceptions. At the cultural level, perceptions of Korea's cultural image are more strongly associated with more strongly by pre-arrival image and gender (control variable), while expectation gap plays a comparatively weaker role, suggesting that cultural perceptions are rooted more in prior beliefs and individual characteristics than in direct lived experience. At the macro level, perceptions of Korea's global and diplomatic image are shaped by perceived social media depiction inaccuracy, expectation gap, pre-arrival image, and duration of stay, indicating that broader evaluations are influenced by media-related factors, prior impressions, and long-term exposure. Across all three models, expectation gap consistently shows a negative association, underscoring its central importance in perception formation. Overall, these findings suggest that expectation gaps, interpretation of negative experiences, and perceived social media depiction inaccuracy are associated with personal perception of Korea's image change, perceptions of Korean culture (Hallyu), and perceptions of Korea's global and diplomatic image among international student. This reinforces the need for a multi-level analytical framework to understand country image formation and suggests that a single explanatory model is insufficient to capture the complexity of how international students construct and adjust their perceptions of a host country.

In real-world contexts, these multi-level dynamics are reflected in the everyday experiences of international students in South Korea. For instance, a student who arrives with highly positive expectations shaped by Hallyu and social media may initially perceive Korea as culturally vibrant and welcoming. However, when faced with challenges such as language barriers or academic pressure, the gap between expectations and lived experiences may lead to negative changes in personal perceptions. At the same time, the student may continue to hold favorable views of Korean popular culture, as these are largely rooted in pre-arrival exposure. Meanwhile, perceptions of Korea's global and diplomatic image may evolve through ongoing engagement with media, public discourse, and extended residence. This example illustrates how expectation gaps, experience interpretation, and media influences operate differently across personal, cultural, and macro dimensions, reinforcing the value of a multi-level framework in understanding country image formation.

6.2. Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of Korea's image formation in international contexts by proposing and empirically supporting a multi-level framework encompassing micro, cultural, and macro level perceptions. First, the findings identify expectation gap as a key mechanism at the individual level, highlighting the role of cognitive appraisal and supporting research that individuals actively interpret their intercultural experiences (Ward

et al., 2021). Second, perceptions of Korea's cultural image (e.g., Hallyu) are shown to be shaped primarily by pre-existing beliefs and demographic factors rather than direct experience, reinforcing the influence of pre-arrival media exposure (Jin, 2021) and challenging the assumption that intercultural contact alone reshapes perceptions. Third, macro-level perceptions of Korea's global and diplomatic image are driven more by media credibility and prior beliefs than lived experiences, with the significant role of perceived social media inaccuracy aligning with recent studies on digital media's influence on national image (Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2020). Overall, the study advances the literature by demonstrating that Korea's image formation operates through distinct mechanisms across different levels, offering a more differentiated and nuanced framework for understanding international perception dynamics.

6.3. Managerial Implications

The findings offer important practical implications for policymakers and educational institutions seeking to enhance Korea's image among international students. The consistent negative impact of expectation gaps highlights the importance of accurate pre-arrival communication through official and digital platforms. The strong role of interpreting negative experiences at the individual level underscores the need for post-arrival support, including adaptation programs, mentoring, and counseling services. The negative influence of perceived social media inaccuracy on global perceptions suggests the importance of transparent and credible communication strategies, ensuring alignment between online representations and actual experiences. The significance of pre-arrival image in shaping cultural and macro-level perceptions indicates that international branding and public diplomacy efforts should focus on building a consistent and favorable image through digital media and cultural promotion. Finally, as longer durations of stay are associated with more critical perceptions, continuous engagement strategies are necessary to sustain positive experiences over time.

6.4. Limitations and Future Studies

This study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design of this study limits the ability to draw causal inferences among the variables. Future longitudinal research could provide stronger evidence regarding the direction and evolution of perception change over time. Second, A limitation of this study is the reliance on single item measures for several key constructs, which may not fully capture their multidimensional nature and does not permit the assessment of internal consistency reliability (e.g., Cronbach's alpha). Future research should employ validated multi-item scales to strengthen construct validity and measurement robustness. Third, the focus on international students in Korea limits generalizability, and future

studies should include other groups such as tourists or expatriates. Although key variables were examined, additional factors like cultural distance, personality traits, and language proficiency were not included, which may affect explanatory power. Fourth, reliance on self-reported data may introduce response bias; mixed-method approaches could provide deeper insights. Finally, the ordered logistic regression model assumes proportional odds, which may not fully reflect complex relationships; alternative analytical methods are recommended. Despite these limitations, the study offers a valuable multi-level framework for understanding how international students form perceptions of Korea's image and provides a foundation for future research and policy development.

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