



**UNIVERSITY
OF TURKU**

THE INTERPLAY OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND SOCIAL MEDIA.

How Governmental Supporter Programs Contribute to Korean Public Diplomacy and Impact
the Lives and Perceptions of Participating Foreign Social Media Influencers.

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Abstract

This research investigates South Korea's use of *Supporter Programs*, government-funded initiatives that recruit foreign social media influencers (SMIs) to promote Korea on social media in exchange for trips, access to cultural events, merchandise and other benefits. By employing qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews with participating foreign SMIs and a web-based analysis of 20 *Supporter Programs*, this research explores participants' motivations for and experiences of participating in those initiatives, the impact it has on their lives in South Korea, and the broader implications for South Korea's public diplomacy.

Thematic analysis of interview data reveals six categories of motivations of foreign SMIs for participating in *Supporter Programs*: financial incentives, opportunities for travel and exploration, social connections, entertainment, intrinsic rewards, and prestige. Additionally, these programs help foreign SMI acclimate to Korean society by enabling them to build a community and make friends, providing access to cultural experiences, and deepening their understanding of Korean culture. Beyond that, *Supporter Programs* help South Korea increase the amount of positive and curated by governmental bodies social media content, shape favourable perceptions of Korea among participants, and support participating foreign residents' integration into Korea and its society.

This study provides new insights into the existing research on South Korea's public diplomacy by highlighting the dual benefits of *Supporter Programs* for participating foreign SMIs and South Korea's soft power.

Key words: Public Diplomacy, Supporter Programs, Soft Power, Social Media, Social Media Influencers, Social Exchange Theory, South Korea, Republic of Korea.

Table of contents

1	Introduction	9
1.1	Research questions and design	10
2	Literature Review and Theoretical Framework	12
2.1	Review of existing literature on the use of SMIs in public diplomacy	12
2.2	Public Diplomacy	15
2.2.1	Soft Power	17
2.3	Social Exchange Theory	19
3	Key Concepts and background on Korea's Public Diplomacy Strategy	22
3.1	Social media and SMIs	22
3.1.1	Social Media	22
3.1.2	Social Media Influencers	23
3.2	Korea's Public Diplomacy Strategy	27
3.2.1	History of Korea's public diplomacy since 1945	27
3.2.2	Korea's public diplomacy strategy today	32
3.3	Governmental Supporter Programs for Foreigners in Korea	35
3.3.1	Typology of Supporter Programs	38
4	Research Design and Fieldwork	44
4.1	Methodology	44
4.1.1	Preparation for data collection and pilot study	44
4.1.2	Use of qualitative semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection	45
4.1.3	Interview content analysis method	47
4.1.4	Ethics of the research	48
4.2	Fieldwork in Korea	48
4.2.1	Interviews with foreign SMIs in Korea	49
4.2.2	Participation in Supporter Program with a foreign SMI	51
5	Results and Analysis	53
5.1	Foreign SMIs' motivations for and experience of participating in governmental Supporter Programs in Korea	53
5.1.1	Motivations	53
5.1.2	Foreign SMIs' Experience of Participating in Supporter Programs: Costs & Rewards Analysis and Reciprocity & Commitment Stability	56

5.2	How does participating in <i>Supporter programs</i> impact SMIs' perception of Korea?	58
5.2.1	Comparison Level & Enhanced Perception of Korea	60
5.2.2	Enhanced experience of living in Korea	62
5.3	Implications for Korea's Public Diplomacy Strategy	63
5.3.1	Social Media	64
5.3.2	<i>Supporter Programs</i> as embodiment of Korea's public diplomacy strategy	67
6	Conclusion	71
	References	76
	Appendices	86
	Appendix 1: Interview questions	86
	Appendix 2: Supporter Programs Details	87
	Appendix 3: Interviewee details	100
	Appendix 4: Themes identified during the thematic analysis of interviews	100
	Appendix 5: Participant Information Sheet	104
	Appendix 6: Informed Consent Form	108
	Appendix 7: Demographic Data Form	109

Tables

Table 1: Interview details	49
Table 2: Interviewees' social media presence and participation in Supporter Programs.....	51
Table 3: Motivations to participate in governmental Supporter Programs in Korea per interviewee.....	55

Abbreviations

DPRK - Democratic People's Republic of Korea

GSM - Global Seoul Mates

KCC - Korean Culture Centers

KF - Korea Foundation

KOCIS - Korean Culture and Information Service

KOIS - Korean Overseas Information Service

KPI - Key Performance Indicator

KTO – Korea Tourism Organization

MOFA – Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Korea

OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PDA – Public Diplomacy Act

ROK - Republic of Korea

SMI – Social Media Influencer

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Disclosure

This research was conducted using the following artificial intelligence (AI) tools to improve work efficiency:

- ChatGPT - Brainstorming, data collection, and summarising external resources used for reference in this study.
- Grammarly - Proofreading.
- NotebookLM - Mapping written materials, textual analysis, and summarising external resources used for reference in this study.

Explanation of each process:

- **Brainstorming** - I discussed with the AI machine various ideas for research topics based on my initial interests, ideas for research questions, and possible interview questions. I made the final decisions by myself, and AI suggestions were used to spark new ideas.
- **Data Collection** – I asked AI for suggestions on academic sources that can be used and to help me find Supporter Programs to streamline the search process. I then

independently analysed all of the suggested sources, upon which I personally decided on their relevance and gathered data. This did not prove very helpful, so only a few resources were identified in this way.

- **Summarisation and textual analysis of external resources** – I asked AI to analyse resources to check if the given papers or documents are relevant for this research and to make the process of selecting the most suited papers more efficient. After the research papers were initially screened by AI to select the most suited sources, they were then always independently read and analysed by me. This helped save time on reading research papers that were not useful for the purpose of my study.
- **Proofreading** – checking spelling, punctuation and grammar correctness of the written text.
- **Mapping written materials** – I asked AI to find in the research papers specific topics, themes and quotes to streamline the process of re-reviewing previously read literature. This helped streamline the process of finding specific information in the literature that was repeatedly used by me throughout the thesis writing process.

AI was used to enhance and improve processes, improve the linguistic quality of the text and spark new ideas while conducting this research. However, I always also independently reviewed all of the resources and wrote the entire paper with my own words. The AI was never used to write any part of the text itself or form arguments. All findings included in this paper are solely a result of my own rigorous research, analysis, and writing.

1 Introduction

In 2022, the British newspaper *The Guardian* published an article titled 'K-everything: the rise and rise of Korean culture' (Adams, 2022). The author explained South Korea's (hereinafter Korea) strategic use of cultural exports, which successfully transformed Korea's image from a war-torn nation to a cultural powerhouse. By culture, he meant not only K-pop and K-dramas, but also Korean movies, games, cuisine and art. Interviewed by Adams director of the Korean Culture and Information Service, said that "about 10 years ago, we noticed the big shift. (...) Before that, most of the coverage of Korea in the foreign press was about national defence. And now it is all about culture." (Adams, 2022) After many years of investments and exporting cultural products, and only a few years after the country introduced for the first time an official public diplomacy strategy, Korea managed to change the narrative and position itself as a global cultural phenomenon that all countries look up to for a 'know-how'.

With the rise of popularity of BTS, *Parasite*, *Squid Game*, Han Kang, Son Heung-min and many other ikons and symbols of Korean culture, Korea became a desired travel destination, with over 17 million visitors in 2019 (Statista, 2024). In 2024, those numbers are for the first time reaching the pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels and are projected to exceed that in upcoming years (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2024). Additionally to increased tourism, the population of foreigners living in Korea is also growing. As of 2024, foreigners comprise 4.89 per cent of the total population – the highest percentage in the country's history (Korea.net, 2024-a). With the rise to global prominence of Korean culture and the influx of foreign tourism and residents, the country is increasingly investing in public diplomacy to ensure that the country stays relevant and continues to appeal to global audiences. One way in which Korea has been doing that is through *Supporter Programs* – initiatives that recruit foreign social media influencers (SMIs) living in Korea to promote the country on social media in exchange for trips around the country, tickets to cultural events, K-pop concerts or festivals, merchandise, certificates, the unofficial titles of 'ambassadors' or 'supporters' of Korea, and other benefits. Those programs use the simultaneous rise of popularity of Korean culture and social media globally. As Korea is becoming more and more desirable globally, more people choose to create social media accounts dedicated to Korea-related content to ride on the wave of Korean popularity and gain followers and vogue alongside it. As more and more foreigners (and Koreans) recognise that pattern and join the trend, they contribute to Korea's public diplomacy goal of increasing the country's prominence on social media (Lee &

Abidin, 2022-a). However, besides relying on people to post regularly about the country, the Korean government decided to amplify this trend through *Supporter Programs*, which are the main topic of this research. This research takes a unique approach and analyses the official governmental public diplomacy strategy surrounding *Supporter Programs* and the experience and motivations of foreign SMIs participating in those programs, who are simultaneously recipients of and contributors to Korea's public diplomacy.

This research is timely because we live in the era of social media. As of 2024, 63.8 per cent of the global population was active on social media and spent an average of over 2 hours daily on those platforms (Kepios, 2024-a). Although the authors of those statistics acknowledge that the final numbers might be slightly different due to some people having multiple social media accounts, those numbers are still staggering. With the rapid rise of social media platforms, which enabled anyone to share their opinion online, social media content creators emerged as influential figures who are able to impact the opinions and purchasing decisions of social media users, earning them the title of 'influencers' (Abidin, 2017, p. 160; Kim & Kim, 2021, p. 229). They tend to gain popularity and relevance while gradually building up their follower base, and it is their grassroots-like rise to prominence that makes the SMIs relatable and, through that, also come across as authentic (Abidin, 2017, p. 161). This can explain why so many people choose to use social media as a source of information, and this is why influencer marketing has become a new global trend. Korea is capitalising on it through *Supporter Programs* and recruitment of foreign SMIs, who help boost Korea's online presence by explaining Korean culture and promoting Korea as a tourist destination.

1.1 Research questions and design

There is very limited academic research available on the topic of *Supporter Programs* and the collaboration between countries and foreign SMIs (Arnesson, 2022; Lee & Abidin, 2022; Xu et al., 2022; Jin & Lee, 2018). While SMIs are a considerably new phenomenon, they are emerging as incredibly influential figures due to the widespread use of social media globally and the increased trust that social media users give SMIs (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Abidin, 2015; Brooks et al., 2021). Many companies already use the so-called 'influencer marketing' as a public relations tool to promote their brands effectively, and countries are increasingly adapting to this new trend (Lee & Abidin, 2022; Arnesson, 2022; Xu et al., 2022; Lee & Jin, 2018). The widespread implementation of *Supporter Programs* by Korean central and local governments and other governmental bodies shows that this country is leading that trend by

effectively navigating the current times in which the presence on social media makes one relevant. Despite that, there is still a considerable research gap that exists on this topic, which this study aims to help narrow. In order to do that, this paper intends to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. What are foreign SMIs' motivations for and experiences of participating in government-sponsored '*Supporter programs*' in South Korea?
2. How does the experience of participating in *Supporter Programs* affect foreign SMIs' perception of South Korea and their experience of living there?
3. In what ways do *Supporter Programs* contribute to the execution of South Korea's public diplomacy?

To understand the impact of *Supporter Programs* on Korea's public diplomacy strategy and its participants, this research employs qualitative semi-structured interviews and web-based research methods. Using those methods, this research aims to produce robust findings on foreign SMIs' motivations and experiences of participating in *Supporter Programs* and those programs' role in Korea's public diplomacy strategy.

The structure of this research paper is as follows. Chapter 2 presents the findings of the literature review and introduces theories used in this study, such as Social Exchange Theory, soft power and public diplomacy. Next, Chapter 3 provides background information, including an explanation of key concepts— social media, social media influencers, and *Supporter Programs* – and Korea's public diplomacy history and current strategy. Chapter 4 explains the methodology and the process of conducting fieldwork in Korea. Chapter 5 presents the research findings and answers to the three research questions asked in this study. The final remarks and conclusions are outlined in Chapter 6.

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter provides an outline of the existing academic literature on the relationship between SMIs and governments globally and in Korea, as well as an outline of the main theories used in this study. Considering that social media and social media influencers are a considerably recent phenomenon (this is in detail explained in section 3.1), there is still limited research available on the use of social media influencers by governments. All of the relevant identified studies are discussed below. Additionally, this chapter explores the theories of public diplomacy, soft power and Social Exchange Theory, all of which are relevant to the topic of this study. The key concepts, such as social media and social media influencers, all of which are extensively brought up in this chapter, are explained in detail in Chapter 3.

2.1 Review of existing literature on the use of SMIs in public diplomacy

Influencer marketing – the use of SMIs to promote one’s brand - is a commonly used marketing strategy in the era of social media (Geyser, 2023). This tactic came to prominence in the late 2010s and early 2020s and was enabled by a rapid rise of social media and the accumulation of celebrity capital by SMIs (Brooks et al., 2021). This is discussed in detail in section 3.1, which explains the concepts of social media and SMIs. However, despite the large amount of research that exists already about SMIs and influencer marketing in the context of marketing, persuasion power of SMIs and negative impacts of the rise of SMIs on social media users (Masuda et al., 2022; Barari, 2023; Lou et al., 2023; Ki et al., 2020), few scholarly works discuss them in the context of their use by governments (Lee & Abidin, 2022; Arnesson, 2022; Xu et al., 2022; Lee & Jin, 2018). One study focusing on foreign SMIs is the work by Lee and Abidin, who discuss the case of the Korean government hiring foreign SMIs¹ to promote the country on YouTube in the form of paid partnerships (2022). The authors found the relationship between SMIs and the government unequal due to power imbalances between the actors (p. 549-551). Consequently, those SMIs who collaborated with the government and were faced, in their view, with unequal treatment mainly chose to stop the relationship after it proved socially unequal. The authors argue that the SMIs they interviewed are motivated not only by financial gains but also by social causes (ibid., p. 550). This finding is consistent with the principle of reciprocity associated with Social Exchange Theory, which is adopted as the theoretical framework of this thesis. Although Lee and Abidin do not use the

¹ This study refers to foreign SMIs ‘oegugin Influencers’, which translates to ‘foreign influencers’.

same theory in their research, their findings confirm the need for reciprocity and trust in a relationship between SMIs and the governmental bodies for it to last, indicating that this theory is suitable to my research. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the type of collaboration described by Lee and Abidin is based on the provision of paid and clearly defined services by foreign SMIs for the government, which can be compared to the client-service provider type of relationship defined in a legally binding contract (financial exchange). The relationships described in my research are created in a less formal way, where foreign SMIs are invited to participate in different types of activities, trips or festivals in exchange for the voluntary creation of social media content. No official legal penalties are imposed on SMIs for not creating the content, so the relationship relies on trust rather than legal obligation. Additionally, their research does not discuss *Supporter Programs*. Therefore, while Lee and Abidin's research is helpful for this study, it focuses on an inherently different matter and type of relationship.

Another of the few available papers on the SMIs' relations with foreign countries is the research by Arnesson, who analysed the relationship between Swedish SMI and the United Arab Emirates government (2022). He considers their relationship as a commercial collaboration based on co-branding, with both sides inevitably being affected and associated with each other's brand status (2022, p. 1469). Although based only on a single SMI and mainly limited to discussion on the influencer's relationship with the audience, this study assigns the SMIs -UAE relationship purely transactional value, contrary to Lee and Abidin's argument that the social equality of partners also plays a role. Those two cases discuss the relationship between foreign SMIs and the governments of foreign countries. However, according to Xu et al., the dynamics can be drastically different when the government and SMIs collaborating belong to the same country, as in the discussed by them case of China (2022, p. 527). The authors of that study analysed Chinese SMIs and their relationship with the Chinese state, where the choice of freely opting into the relationship does not exist, meaning that the exchange is not based on reciprocity but rather on force or possibility of punishment (ibid.). While Lee and Abidin made an argument that the relationship between SMIs and the government is based on the social and economic benefits (2022, p. 550), and Arnesson proved that that exchange could also be more purely a commercial collaboration (2022, p. 1469), Xu et al. suggest that those factors are not relevant in authoritarian countries like China where the government is using coercion to direct SMIs activities and type of content they post (2022, p. 531). This shows that while considering the exchange between the

government and SMIs, it is vital to understand the political setting and whether there is a possibility of intimidation of people that forces them to enter the exchange.

Another relevant research study was conducted by Jin and Lee, who analysed the motivations and experiences of students participating in *Supporter Programs*² in Changwon City in Korea (2018, p. 97). In many ways, their research resembles this thesis, as both papers are concerned with governmental *Supporter Programs* in Korea and participants' experiences of participating in those initiatives. Jin and Lee's findings on the *Supporter Programs* are helpful in the context of my study, as they provided a starting point for researching similar initiatives for foreigners in Korea. As the authors mention, those types of activities can have different names depending on the local government organising them. Some examples include *SNS 관광홍보 서포터즈* (gwangwanghongbo seopoteojeu³– meaning 'SNS Tourism Promotion Supporters'), *SNS 관광서포터즈* (gwangwang seopoteojeu - meaning 'SNS Tourism Supporters'), *SNS 서포터즈* (SNS seopoteojeu – meaning 'SNS Supporters') or *관광 서포터즈* (gwangwang seopoteojeu – meaning 'Tourism Supporters') (ibid., 98). Jin and Lee consider those programs to be a new type of tourism volunteering activity that leverages participants' personal social media reach to promote local tourism. As part of this program, participants must post about local tourist attractions on their social media accounts. Authors argue that due to the effectiveness of this approach, many local governments have been implementing this type of initiative throughout Korea. Volunteers who participate in those SNS tourism promotion volunteer activities are not financially compensated but instead are able to participate for free in organised trips, at times join workshops where they can learn new digital or creative skills, and claim the time dedicated to those programs as 'volunteering' activity, which is important for university students who have to fulfil volunteering work as a part of their degrees. Discussed by Jin and Lee programs are similar to those discussed in this thesis *Supporter Programs*, as they also recruit people to promote local tourism on social media and offer mostly non-financial benefits for participation. However, they differ in a few details, including their target audience. Discussed by Jin and Lee program recruited Korean university students, while this thesis focuses on initiatives targeting foreigners living in

² Authors use the term 'SNS tourism promotion volunteer activities' instead of Supporter Program.

³ This thesis uses the Revised Romanization of Korean, which is the official system used in Korea and by Korean Government.

Korea. Additionally, while Jin and Lee consider *Supporter Programs* to be a form of volunteering due to participants' feeling of social responsibility, this thesis sees them more like a mutually beneficial exchange between the organiser and the participant.

While all of those studies provide useful findings, none use Social Exchange Theory to explain the relationship between the state and foreign SMIs. Hence, this study will test whether the Social Exchange Theory can be used to explain the relationship between Korea and foreign SMIs by analysing the motivations of foreign SMIs living in Korea to participate in governmental *Supporter Programs*. Depending on the motivations and experiences identified through interviews with SMIs, we would be able to understand what the exchange between the Korean government and foreign SMIs is based on from the perspective of foreign SMIs, and how that relationship contributes to Korea's public diplomacy strategy.

2.2 Public Diplomacy

Public Diplomacy is a popular term used by social and political scientists to conceptualise states' foreign policy toward foreign individuals (Gilboa, 2008; Cull, 2019; Melissen & Wang, 2019) and to build upon the discussion on the importance of soft power and its role in foreign policy (Nye, 2019; Cull, 2019; Cull, 2022). Although it became an important term in the political sciences field, the debate continues among scholars on whether it should be considered an independent theory or a sub-theory of the theory of soft power (Gilboa, 2008; Melissen, 2019; Elvianti, 2015). However, regardless of the status of public diplomacy, it is now a widely agreed-upon term and practice that is not only used by scholars but also by national governments, which commonly adopt and openly outline their specific public diplomacy goals. That includes the governments of Korea (MOFA, no date), the United States (U.S. Department of State, no date), Japan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, no date), Australia (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, no date) and others.

Public diplomacy does not have one agreed-upon definition. Instead, it has been a constantly evolving term, adjusted for new realities and advancements. Public diplomacy is not a new practice, but the term itself and the first definition was first coined by Edmund Gullion and mentioned in 1965 in the Edward R. Murrow Center of Public Diplomacy's Brochure (Nye, 2019; Cull, 2006, p. 13):

Public diplomacy...deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy; the cultivation by governments of public

opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the process of intercultural communications. (Edmund Gullion, as cited in Cull, 2006, p. 13)

A common denominator identified both by Gullion and other scholars defining public diplomacy mentioned throughout this section is their focus on reaching the foreign public as a means to benefit the country employing a public diplomacy strategy. For example, Sharp considers public diplomacy as 'the process by which direct relations are pursued with a country's people to advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented' (2005, p. 106). Similarly, Malone described public diplomacy as 'direct communication with foreign peoples, with the aim of affecting their thinking and, ultimately, that of their governments' (1985, p. 199). Both Gullion and Malone's definitions consider public diplomacy to be a two-step process, in which firstly, foreign publics are influenced, and secondly, the foreign publics influence their own governments to implement a policy favourable to the state that pursues public diplomacy. This is important because it indicates that public diplomacy can be considered supplementary or even an alternative to conventional, state-to-state diplomacy.

While there is a consensus among the above-mentioned scholars about the aim and addressees of public diplomacy, there is less agreement on who participates in the creation of public diplomacy. For example, Melissen and Wang consider the state of being the sole player who 'create[s] and maintain[s] relationships with publics in other societies to advance policies and actions' (2019, p. 2). Also, Tuch believes that public diplomacy is a 'government's process of communication with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and policies' (1990, p. 3). Tuch's definition is vaguer than that of Melissen and Wang, as it does not exactly exclude the possibility of states delegating the task of conducting public diplomacy to other actors, but it equally does not specify it as a prospect. On the other hand, several scholars explicitly suggest that public diplomacy is produced by the state and the public. Gullion, in his above-cited definition, directly mentioned several stakeholders, such as 'private groups (...), those whose job is communication, as diplomats and foreign correspondents' (as cited in Cull, 2006, p. 13). He also considered 'intercultural communications' as a public diplomacy activity, which does not specify the executor and could be interpreted in many ways, for example, as a task performed solely by the state, or the

contrary, as an activity that anyone can perform (ibid.). Signitzer and Coombs are more specific in their definition, suggesting that public diplomacy is delivered by ‘both government and private individuals and groups’ (1992, p. 138), while Hocking argues that we need a ‘redefinition of public diplomacy in terms of an active role for publics rather than as passive objects of government foreign policy strategies’ (Hocking, 2005, p. 30). The latter approach, one that considers public diplomacy to be produced both by the government and the public, is in line with the argument of this study, which suggests that foreign SMIs participate in Korea’s public diplomacy creation.

While all of the above-mentioned definitions allow for much room for interpretation regarding how public diplomacy is conducted, Cull offers a more extensive definition by listing core and supplementary principles of public diplomacy, which explain the action that needs to happen to pursue it (2019). It is also the most insightful description from the point of view of this research because it explains in detail the process of conducting public diplomacy. The seven core principles, according to Cull, are ‘1) begin by listening; 2) connect to policy; 3) do not perform for domestic consumption; 4) look for credibility and partnership; as 5) the most credible voice is not your own. 6) Public diplomacy is not always ‘about you’; but 7) is everyone’s business’ (ibid, p. 27). Those principles indicate that public diplomacy is a two-way communication that is not only initiated by the state but, rather the contrary, is more effective when also done by non-state actors, who can be considered more credible. This can help explain why foreign SMIs are used by the Korean government to produce public diplomacy (points four and five of Cull’s principles). Foreign SMIs are likely to be considered a more credible voice by their followers than the voice of government, which is described further in section 2.3., making them a perfect ally to include in public diplomacy. Additionally to holding influencing power, interviews show that foreigners participating in *Supporter Programs* tend to share largely positive stories and experiences with Korea on social media, which further contributes to building a positive image of Korea in the online sphere, which is in line with Cull’s argument.

2.2.1 Soft Power

It is impossible to talk about public diplomacy without mentioning soft power, which is ‘the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment’ (Nye, 2008, p. 94). Since the primary purpose of public diplomacy is to attract foreign publics, which is more likely to be achieved through attraction than coercion or

threats, public diplomacy can be considered a means of increasing a country's soft power. According to Nye, 'countries that are likely to be more attractive in postmodern international relations are those that help to frame issues, whose culture and ideas are closer to prevailing international norms, and whose credibility abroad is reinforced by their values and policies' (as cited in Melissen, 2005, p. 4). Therefore, the key to becoming an attractive state from the point of view of foreign publics and achieving high levels of soft power is successful public diplomacy that can frame the country's policies and ideas in line with the system of values of targeted foreign individuals. That is easier to achieve for values such as core human rights, democracy, or the rule of law, which are commonly pursued by people globally, even if they are not necessarily pursued by their governments. However, for countries such as Korea, which has significant cultural differences from mainstream Western cultures, its public diplomacy strategy needs to focus more on explaining the cultural differences and making its culture desirable, understandable, and relatable. While the rise in popularity of Korean music, dramas, games, and literature helps with that, equally important are the stories coming from Korea that are increasingly shared on social media, both by Koreans and foreigners who reinterpret the culture and communicate about it in a way that is understandable and digestible to their foreign audiences. And this is what *Supporter Programs* are designed to do, which is discussed in section 3.3.

While Nye is the most prominent scholar in the field of soft power, Lee offers an alternative way of looking at it. He does it through the angle of soft and hard resources rather than the traditional distinction between coercive and cooptive power proposed by Nye (Lee, 2009). In his view, that is a more applicable and tangible way to perceive soft power, especially for middle powers such as Korea. Lee argues that states pursue soft power to achieve the following five policy goals:

- (1) To improve the external security environment by projecting peaceful and attractive images of a country; (...)
- (2) To mobilize other countries' support for one's foreign and security policies; (...)
- (3) To manipulate other countries' way of thinking and preferences; (...)
- (4) To maintain the unity of a community or community of countries; (...)
- (5) To increase the approval ratings of a leader, or domestic support for a government. (Lee, 2009; 207-208).

This supplementary definition, especially the first two points, aligns with Cull's argument that effective public diplomacy helps ensure reputational security (2019, 2022). Lee's point number three, which speaks about manipulation of 'other countries' way of thinking and preferences', can be considered a more direct interpretation of public diplomacy goals as

defined by Cull, Gullion or Malone, showing a strong correlation between the pursuit of public diplomacy and attainment of soft power (Cull, 2006; Nye, 2019; Nye, 2006; Malone, 1985). Among the listed by Lee goals, *Supporter Programs* can help achieve at least the first four, if not all. Soft power is an important concept in the context of this research, not only because it is a core part of the concept of public diplomacy, but also because it is a key component that makes the *Supporter Programs* and attractive to foreigners. Foreign participants in those programs are tasked with promoting Korea on social media in exchange for trips, access to cultural events, and other activities. However, their content would not be as authentic, and consequently not very effective, if they promoted a country that does not respect universal values and talked about a culture unfamiliar to foreign audiences. The popularity of Korean culture makes *Supporter Programs* attractive to foreign SMIs and their audiences on social media.

2.3 Social Exchange Theory

The increasing popularity of SMIs and their effectiveness in gaining trust and support from their followers can be explained through the Social Exchange Theory. The theory was popularised in the 1920s, and it has since attracted scholars in various fields within the spectrum of social sciences to use it as an explanation of social relationships (Ahmad et al., 2023, p. 2). On a high level, Social Exchange Theory is defined as the “exchange of activity, tangible or intangible, and more or less rewarding or costly, between at least two people” (Homans, 1961, p.13). The exchange here means ‘voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring’ (Ahmad et al., 2023, p. 2). They can expect returns due to what is described by Blau as the principle of reciprocity, which suggests that if a person receives a service, they are expected to show gratitude and offer something in return (1964, p. 336). When the exchange is continuous, a relationship is developed. However, it can only be maintained if it is based on equilibrium, where exchanges benefit both parties. When the relationship is strong and is maintained successfully, the outcomes are the trust and loyalty between the parties in the relationship (Kim & Kim, 2021, 229). According to prominent Social Exchange Theory scholars, the accumulation of successful social exchange ultimately can lead to the accumulation of social status and power (Blau, 1964, p. 269; Homans, 1958, p. 605-605).

In the context of relationship-building on social media, when SMIs are creating content in the form of videos, pictures, text or another form that are considered attractive, useful or

interesting by social media users, those users express their gratitude through reactions, such as following, liking, viewing, commenting or sharing, which can be explained by Blau's principle of reciprocity. Kim and Kim argue that the relationship between the SMIs and the social media users, who then become followers, is built and cultivated over a long period of time of continued exchanges and is based on trust, which depends heavily on SMIs' 'expertise, authenticity, and homophily' as perceived by their followers (2021, p. 223). In the social media sphere, the principle of reciprocity is key to maintaining the relationship, meaning that SMIs need to continuously deliver the content that followers expect, enjoy and find valuable. In return, followers reward it by interacting with the produced content, increasing the social capital and value of the SMI. According to Kim and Kim's study of over 384 U.S. adults following SMIs on social media, the trust developed between followers and SMIs strongly correlates with the follower's purchase intent and their opinions and behaviours (ibid.). Another study by Chia et al. found a correlation between SMIs' credibility, attractiveness, and homophily and their followers' attitudes and purchase intentions (2021, p. 17). Significantly, Kim and Kim found that 'trust enhanced followers' acceptance of endorsements, regardless of relationship strength' (2021, p. 229). Those two studies suggest that SMIs can have a lasting social and economic impact on the people who follow them through the content they deliver. However, according to Social Exchange Theory, they need to maintain continuous relationships with their followers by nurturing their followers' dependency on the content they offer, for example, by 'sharing valuable information, entertainment, and attractive characteristics' (ibid. 224). Ultimately, SMIs' ability to maintain relationships and build trust leads to an increase in their social power and status, which, coupled with the increase in the number of social media users, makes influencer marketing desirable for brands and governments. By working with SMIs, governments can capitalise on the trust and status achieved by SMIs and tap into their networks in an authentic and organic-like way, helping governments achieve their public diplomacy goals.

This research attempts to test if Social Exchange Theory can also be used to explain the relationship between governments and SMIs using the case of *Supporter Programs*. There are very few scholarly works on the topic of government-SMI exchange or relations, described in section 2.1., and none of them uses Social Exchange Theory to explain that relationship. The study by Lee and Abidin (2022), although it did not use this theory specifically, confirms the importance of reciprocity in the relationship between Korea and foreign SMIs, indicating that this is a relevant theory for this research. Consequently, this study attempts to test whether the

Social Exchange Theory can explain the relationship between Korea and foreign SMIs by analysing the motivations and experiences of participating in governmental *Supporter Programs* by foreign SMIs living in Korea. Depending on the motivations and types of experiences identified through interviews, we would be able to understand what conditions this exchange from the perspective of foreign SMIs and how that relationship impacts Korea's public diplomacy.

3 Key Concepts and background on Korea's Public Diplomacy Strategy

This background chapter provides a detailed description of key concepts of this thesis – social media, social media influencers and supporter programs – and adopted by this study definitions of those concepts. Additionally, it provides background information on Korea's history and current public diplomacy strategy, which would help explain the role of *Supporter Programs*.

3.1 Social media and SMIs

As of October 2024, an estimated 67.5 per cent of the global population, or some 5.52 billion people, were connected to the internet (Kepios, 2024). The widespread and constantly increasing access to the internet, especially in developed countries, enables the use of social media platforms, which have been globally growing in prominence ever since the early 2000s. By October 2024, 94.5 per cent of internet users were active on social media, spending on average over 2 hours on those platforms (Kepios, 2024-a). Leading platforms such as Facebook and YouTube have over 2 billion users each, while Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn and WeChat each have over a billion users (ibid.; Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). A survey conducted in 2019 in 22 OECD countries showed that internet users spend an average of 5.7 hours browsing the internet, of which 2.2 hours are spent on social media (Datareportal, 2019). Daily usage of the internet and social media in Korea was in line with those averages (ibid.). The 2022 data shows that in Korea, over 91 per cent of people use social media, which is projected to grow further (Statista, 2023). The widespread use of social media globally began a new era where the presence on social media and the use of SMIs have become essential tools for marketing and outward communication for both companies and governments. This is echoed in the OECD working paper, which states that the 'presence and activity on social media is no longer a question of choice for most governments as those new platforms empower individuals and non-traditional interest groups' (Mickoleit, 2014, p. 2).

3.1.1 Social Media

The term social media was first used in 1994 in Japan, and since then, it evolved significantly (Aichner et al. 2021, p. 215). Currently, it is used as a generic term that 'describes a variety of online platforms, including blogs, business networks, collaborative projects, enterprise social

networks (SN), forums, microblogs, photo sharing, products review, social bookmarking, social gaming, SN, video sharing, and virtual worlds.’ (ibid, p. 215). While a broad spectrum of definitions of social media exists with a varying degree of comprehensiveness, this research will adopt a narrow definition of social media as ‘Web sites and technological applications that allow its users to share content and/or to participate in social networking.’ (ibid, p. 219). This definition, which focuses on the aspect of sharing content and networking, is the most fitting for this study because the SMIs who will be interviewed for the purpose of this research were identified because of their active presence on the social media platform Instagram and are using that platform as the primary mode of communication with their followers. It is important to mention that social media platforms are also referred to by some scholars as Social Networking Sites or SNS (Ellison & Boyd, 2013; Hughes et al., 2012; Lee, 2012; Hwang, 2012). The abbreviation SNS was adopted in Korean language and is used in Korea to refer to social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram. This term is also adapted by organisers of *Supporter Programs*, which sometimes use the term ‘SNS Supporters’ while discussing participants (Seoul Korea, 2024; Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2024).

3.1.2 Social Media Influencers

Social media influencer, on the other hand, is a much newer term that only gained prominence in the late 2010s and early 2020s, based on the list of scholarly works on this matter listed on Scopus (Scopus, 2023) and findings by Hudders et al. (2021). This is conditioned by the relative novelty of social media and the opportunities that the rise of social media platforms creates to connect people globally. Nowadays, anyone with a social media account can become an SMI, as even people with a small social media following are able to exert an impact on their networks through the information they share. Existing scholarship works on the topic of SMIs focus heavily on influencer marketing and branding (Khamis et al., 2017; Kim & Kim, 2022; Hudders et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2020; Koay et al., 2022). Some scholarly articles, including studies by Hudders et al. (2021) and Koay et al. (2022), provide essential findings on the significance of using SMIs to grow relevance and outreach in a globalised world. This is applicable not only to companies and their marketing strategy, which are the main subject of those studies but also to governments, which use public diplomacy for similar reasons. Existing research on the social impacts of social media and SMIs (Hudders et al., 2021; Abidin, 2017; Kim & Kim, 2022) and influencers' behaviours and communication styles (Enke & Borchers, 2019; Abidin, 2015; Brooks et al. 2021) also

provide pivotal background information that helps to explain the relevance of using influencer marketing for public diplomacy purposes and their possible impact. Particularly influential in this area are the findings produced by Abidin, who argues that the multidimensional relatability of SMIs, compromised of their accessibility, believability, authenticity, imitability and intimacy, are the main reasons for their ability to ‘exert influence over a large pool of potential customers’ (Abidin, 2017; 159). In contrast, Brooks et al. argue that the relevance of SMIs and their ability to influence audiences is based on their accumulation of celebrity capital (2021), defined as ‘accumulated media visibility through recurrent media representations’ (Driessens 2013, p. 17). Those two findings, among others, help explain why so many, including the Korean government, chose to diversify their original strategy of hiring celebrities by recruiting SMIs for public diplomacy purposes.

Abidin, who is one of the most prominent scholars researching the subject of SMIs, defines them as ‘everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetise their following by integrating ‘advertorials’ into their blog or social media posts’ (Abidin, 2015, p. 1). A similar definition was adopted by Enke and Borchers, who consider SMIs to be ‘third-party actors who have established a significant number of relevant relationships with a specific quality to influence organisational stakeholders through content production, content distribution, interaction, and personal appearance on the social web’ (2019, p. 261). Both definitions emphasise the role of a large following achieved through social media content production as an element of the definition of SMI. Due to the constantly changing nature of social media and the constantly increasing number of social media users, it is challenging to quantify the ‘large following’, making it arbitrary and vague.

Although many researchers consider the sizeable following as a core requirement for being considered an SMI (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Enke and Borchers, 2019; Abidin, 2015), there is an increasing number of scholars and marketing agencies that acknowledge a strong influencing potential of people with smaller accounts, which are referred to as nano-influencers (Han & Zhang, 2024; He et al., 2024; Prayudi & Oktapiani, 2023). This is in line with Janssen et al.’s argument that even smaller accounts can have the ability to strongly influence their audience, even if it is on a smaller scale (2022, p. 106). There is a general lack of agreement on the number of followers a person needs on social media to be considered a nano-influencer. Numbers range from 100 to 10,000 according to a marketing agency Ethos (no date), ‘fewer

than 1,000' as claimed by researchers He et al. (2024, p. 47), anywhere from 1,000 to 5,000 in the opinion of researchers Han and Zhang (2024, p. 3250) and between 100 and 5,000 as stated by researchers Janssen et al. (2022, p. 106). Similar discrepancies exist for other categorisations of SMIs per the size of their following. Considering that every source adapts a different number and that discrepancies are considerable, this research leans into the *Supporter Programs* analysis to help distinguish who is considered the nano-influencer. Based on the analysis of *Supporter Programs* and the interviews, most of those initiatives require at least 500 followers, which would be the bottom end of the range adopted by this study. With no top range adapted by those programs, this research sets it at an arbitrary 5,000. Similarly, there are disagreements regarding the categorisation of larger accounts, commonly divided by researchers into 'micro-, macro-, mega-, and celebrity influencers' (Himmelboim & Golan, 2023). In this research, accounts between 5,000 and 50,000 are considered as micro-influencers, which is in line with numbers provided by Han and Zhang (2024). Considering that among the interviewed for this study SMIs, the largest account has around 46,000 followers, other categories of influencers are not discussed in this study. Nano- and micro-influencers are considered influential because of the proximity between them and their followers and the possibility of a two-way exchange, which makes them come across as more relatable and authentic, effectively impacting followers' opinions (Wibawa, Pratiwi & Larasati, 2023, p. 236; Prayudi & Oktapiani, 2023, p. 55). This argument is in line with the earlier discussed idea of the multidimensional relatability of social media influencers, which gives them the ability to influence others (Abidin, 2017, p. 161).

While Enke and Borchers do not mention monetisation through advertisements as an important component of SMIs' work, Abidin considers it a crucial, if not the core, element of content production. Similarly, Balaban and Szambolics suggest in their definition that monetisation is the primary purpose of SMIs' work on social media (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022). They define SMIs as 'people with large communities of followers who post on social media in exchange for compensation and perform purposeful strategic communication to achieve organisational goals. They wear many hats; they are content creators, advertising developers, opinion leaders, and entrepreneurs' (ibid, p. 236). All of this shows that there is a large number of variables discussed by researchers regarding the criteria that must be met to be considered an SMI and a lack of general consensus on the definition. This study adopts a definition of SMIs based on the blend of interpretations of the scholars mentioned above, and simultaneously, it is inspired by the Social Exchange Theory. Consequently, this study

considers SMIs to be social media users who work on accumulating followers through creating and distributing content such as pictures, videos, stories and others, and regular relationship-building with their followers, enabling them to accumulate social capital and monetise their following.

Closely linked with the concept of SMIs is the term *influencer marketing*, which is a ‘type of endorsement marketing that uses product recommendations from [social media] influencers to drive sales, but its intended goals involve much broader outcomes, such as gaining the attention of potential customers, generating word-of-mouth effects, and creating customer engagement with a brand or a product’ (Kim & Kim, 2021, p. 223). Influencer marketing is increasingly used by brands globally, and as of 2022, its market size was 16.4 billion USD and was projected to grow to over 21 billion USD by 2023 (Geysler, 2023). Its growth can be explained by the annual increase in social media content production and consumption (Datareportal, 2019). Additionally, with the rise in popularity of social media and SMIs, global internet users have begun to trust SMIs more than traditional media outlets, further perpetuating the increased social media content consumption growth (Ipsos, 2019; Edelman, 2019). Influencer marketing is based on multi-layered relationship building between the influencer and its audience (consumer), between the brand and the influencer and, indirectly, between the brand and consumers (Kim & Kim, 2021, p. 223). Consequently, the trust that influencers accumulate through continuous relationship-building with their followers has a spillover effect on the followers' opinions of the brands represented by the influencers. That creates an opportunity for brands, including states, to capitalise on SMIs' reputations and reach to improve brands' image and gain new potential clients or consumers. In the context of *Supporter Programs*, this spillover effect can help Korea effectively inform and attract foreign publics worldwide through their collaborations with SMIs, who are promoting specifically selected parts of Korea through those programs. This process is further explained in the section 3.3.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that many of the *Supporter Programs* analysed and the people interviewed in this research mostly use the term *content creators* instead of *influencer* or *social media influencer*. Interviewees suggested they are far from being an *influencer*, considering their small following base. Another reason for that could be that the term *content creator* has a more positive connotation than *influencer*, as it implies that the presence on social media adds value by creating content rather than trying to influence others. While I considered changing this research to refer to interviewees as content creators to adapt the

research to the way they identify themselves, upon further analysis of this study topic, which is ultimately concerned with public diplomacy, I decided that the term *social media influencer* is more accurate in this case and for the broader discussion about a specific type of phenomena. While all SMIs are ultimately also content creators, the core reason governments are interested in engaging people active on social media in *Supporter Programs* is their power to influence the opinions of others. In this case, they recruit foreigners to make social media content about Korea and show it to their followers to affect their perceptions of Korea, which is the core of their public diplomacy strategy. Hence, this study will refer to all interviewees as *social media influencers* as their function in the *Supporter Programs* is better explained by that term than *content creator*.

3.2 Korea's Public Diplomacy Strategy

Korea began using the term 'public diplomacy' to outline its strategy in 2010 when it was declared one of the three pillars of the country's diplomatic relations, with state diplomacy and economic diplomacy (MOFA, no date). Listing public diplomacy alongside traditional and economic diplomacy, which are predominantly conducted between governments and other large entities such as MNCs and international institutions, indicated that Korea sees value and potential substantial gain from direct relationship-building with foreign individuals. However, Korea has a much longer history of conducting public diplomacy, with various public relations activities conducted since the Republic of Korea (ROK) proclamation in 1948 (Lee, 2019, p. 76). Throughout time, Korea has gradually developed its public diplomacy strategy to adapt to the domestic political scene, new technological developments, and global events. Today, one of the outcomes of the long process of evolving Korea's public diplomacy strategy was the creation of *Supporter Programs* - initiatives aimed at promoting Korea in the social media sphere through foreign SMIs, which is the subject of this research. This section presents how the transition in Korea's public diplomacy strategy came about and describes the country's current public diplomacy strategy. The subsequent section, 3.3, dives into the practice of Supporters Programs as a unique way of conducting public diplomacy.

3.2.1 History of Korea's public diplomacy since 1945

The history of public diplomacy in Korea is divided by scholars (Lee, 2019, p. 92; Choi, 2019, p. 6-14) into three main periods:

1. The Nation Building & Regime Legitimacy Building era (1948-1960)

2. Economic Development & Political Democratization era (1970-1998)
3. Cultural Public Diplomacy Era (1998 - onwards).

When the Republic of Korea was officially proclaimed in 1948, the government focused its limited resources primarily on traditional state-to-state diplomacy, which even then was sparse and limited to facilitating relations with only a few friendly to ROK nations (Choi, 2019, p. 8; MOFA, no date-b). While some elements of public diplomacy were employed, they focused mainly on one-way communication aimed at legitimising the ROK as the only lawful government on the Korean peninsula (Lee, 2019, p. 94). Authoritarian governments regularly attempted to incorporate more propaganda, cultural diplomacy and even some elements of public diplomacy into their foreign policy. However, those efforts were also fragmented and changed too frequently to produce a cohesive and effective impact (Lee, 2019, p. 95). For example, the Propaganda Division, created under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1948 to impact foreign audiences, was dissolved only six months after its creation (MOFA, 2013). However, despite constant changes to the strategy, the government still implemented some elements of what we now refer to as public diplomacy. While those efforts were still sporadic, the importance of culture became gradually more recognised in foreign policy, especially by President Park Chung-hee (Park, 2015, p. 84-85). For example, his administration created an Information Ministry with officers stationed in six countries (Lee, 2019, p. 96-98). They were tasked with promoting ROK's superiority over the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) mainly to the public in allied countries by using one-way communication methods, such as traditional media.

Ever since the declaration of the Yushin Constitution in 1972, President Park's administration strategy changed from defensive diplomacy focused on the rivalry with DPRK to promoting Korea's rapid economic development. The focus on Korea's 'miracle on Han River' - a term used to describe Korea's rapid economic development in the 1960s and 1970s - continued even after the transition to democracy. The information was disseminated to foreign publics through foreign missions as well as various specially created agencies, including the Korean Overseas Information Service (KOIS) set up in 1971 (Lee, 2019, p. 98), Korean Culture Centers (KCCs) opened in Tokyo in 1979 and New York and Los Angeles and in 1980 in Paris (KOIS, 2011), and later on also through the Korea Foundation created in 1991 (Choi, 2019, p. 11). KOIS, later renamed as Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS), was tasked with overlooking KCCs and acting as 'a bridge that promotes Korea overseas, promotes global cultural exchange and spreads news on Korea to foreign audiences'

(korea.net, no date). KCCs were tasked with ‘providing opportunities to experience the broadest range of Korean culture first-hand’ (KCC, no date). Korea Foundation’s (KF) purpose is similar to that pursued by KCCs, KOCIS and Korean embassies, and it is codified in the Korea Foundation Act (Korea Foundation Act, 2009). Since the 1970s, the target audience for public diplomacy became more diverse, including populations in Japan, China, France, Hungary, Poland and other countries beyond Europe and Asia, in addition to still heavily focusing on influencing the population of its main ally - the United States. As a result, Korea signed cultural agreements with over 80 countries worldwide by 1998 (Choi, 2019, p. 12).

The approach to public diplomacy changed again in 1987, after the transition to democracy and immediately before Korea hosted the 1988 Summer Olympic Games. To enhance its image before the most important global sports event - the Summer Olympic Games - Korea began promoting itself as a vibrant democracy (Lee, 2019, p. 100). Among others, it was done through the creation of English-language channels and radio stations about Korea (Arirang TV) and promoting Korea to foreign audiences through buying advertisements in global media outlets, including CNN (Lee, 2019, p. 100). Gradually, more focus was also put on using culture to promote Korea globally. In 1993, the central government announced a five-year culture growth plan (Choi, 2019, p. 12), which resulted in the announcement of a ‘Visit Korea’ year in 1994 (KTO, no date) and other promotional initiatives. In 1994, President Kim Young-sam’s Presidential Advisory Board on Science & Technology recommended advancing media production to become a strategic national industry. Consequently, 1% of the national budget was dedicated to expanding the export of Korean music, offering subsidies and low-interest loans to the cultural sector and promoting cultural studies at universities (Leong, 2014 as cited in Jin, 2021, p. 4152). While there was a gradual increase in the emphasis on public diplomacy, it was still largely one-way communication, without much conversation and feedback from foreigners (Lee, 2019, p. 101).

A significant change in Korea’s public diplomacy strategy began again in 1998. It was a consequence of the Asian financial crisis and the resulting from those event policies of the first democratically elected opposition president - Kim Dae-jung. One of the first decisions of Kim’s government was to ask the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a bailout to bring Korea back on the financial track, which was conditioned by the implementation of neoliberal economic reforms (Lee, 2019, p. 102). As a part of those reforms, Korea had to liberalise its markets, enabling a more unrestricted flow of capital and opening to foreign investments,

among others. With all those changes, President Kim Dae-jung decided to continue and further increase his predecessor's emphasis on the export of cultural industry products to help rebound the national economy, which was included in his 1998 'New Cultural Plan' (Park, 2015, p. 101-102). This was followed by further expansion and investments in the culture and its export, which was outlined in 1999 'Five Year Plan for the development of the Cultural Industry', the 2000 'The Vision 21 for the Cultural Industry' and the 2001 'The Vision 21 for the Cultural Industry in a Digital Society' (ibid.). One of the primary outcomes of those initiatives was the 1999 Act on The Promotion of Cultural Industries. Article 1 of this act states its purpose with the following words:

To lay the groundwork for the development of cultural industries and enhance the competitiveness thereof, thereby contributing to the improvement of the quality of national cultural life and development of the national economy, by providing for matters necessary for supporting and fostering cultural industries. (Act on The Promotion of Cultural Industries, 2018)

This increased investment in cultural exports was an important step in the global expansion of Korean culture. This process is often referred to as 'Hallyu', which translates to 'Korean Wave' and describes the rise of popularity and rapid spread of Korean culture globally. This shift of focusing on cultural diplomacy as a core message of Korea's public diplomacy was a way of promoting the country in a positive light while redirecting attention away from the country's economic problems. The financial crisis exposed vulnerabilities of Korea's economy, making it challenging to continue pursuing public diplomacy focused on Korean economic growth as in earlier decades. The country had to look for new ways to appeal to global audiences. Providentially for the Korean government, the crisis coincided with the rise of popularity of Korean dramas and music, firstly in neighbouring countries, especially in China, Taiwan and Japan, which is referred to as a Hallyu 1.0, and then globally in the 2010s (Jin, 2021, p. 4154 -1455).

The rise of Hallyu began a new chapter of Korea's public diplomacy strategy. Korean culture and art became globally recognised, which significantly contributed to the greater interest of foreign audiences in Korea as a country, represented in the rapid increase in tourism to the country (OECD, 2022), a sharp increase in the number of foreigners moving there for university (Oh, 2024), seek employment and other reasons (Joo, 2024). While there is a disagreement about whether the rise of Hallyu can be entirely attributed to the work of the Korean government and its public diplomacy (Jin, 2021, p. 4151- 4153), it is a fact that the government has supported the cultural industries heavily ever since the late 1990s, stimulating

and in many cases facilitating the creation of cultural products and its dissemination globally (Kwon & Kim, 2014). The government supported the most promising sectors, including the film, music, and gaming industries, through funding, infrastructure development, and export assistance programs (Kwon & Kim, 2014). Korean culture was promoted abroad directly to the foreign public through overseas exhibits, the creation of permanent Korean exhibit halls, and Korea-themed festivals and other initiatives (Choi, 2019, p. 12-13). Korea Foundation also played an important role in public diplomacy during that period by organising cultural and exchange programs, spreading accurate information about the country (Lee, 2019, p. 101), and organising or funding Korean classes in 50+ countries for foreign audiences (Choi, 2019).

In 2001, the government launched Korea.net - the first official English-language website - to supplement the substantial use of foreign media to spread information and raise global awareness about Korea (Lee, 2019, p. 102). Since its creation, Korea.net has also been present on social media, becoming one of the most popular governmental social media accounts (Korea.net, no date). Those efforts marked a new era in Korea's public diplomacy, which moved from focusing on one-way communication channels such as newspapers and television to the internet and social media, which facilitated two-way information exchange. The shift was possible not only due to technological advancements and the constantly growing number of social media and internet users but also due to the rise in popularity of Korean cultural products, which boosted the amount of social media content about Korea and led to a large following for Korea-focused channels, whether those managed by official governmental bodies or non-governmental actors. In the early 2000s, the government still played the pivotal role in Korea's public diplomacy strategy, and the engagement of the private sector was minimal, yet with the rise of popularity of social media platforms and Korean cultural products, the government increasingly has been trying to collaborate with the private sector on that front. This is reflected in the active engagement of foreign SMIs in *Supporter Programs* in the late 2010s and 2020s, further elaborated in section 3.3.

In the 2000s, Korea's diplomacy shifted toward multilateralism (Lee, 2019, p. 107). The spread of the Korean Wave proved an important element of this plan and led to the government's increasing interest in direct engagement with foreign publics. An example is President Lee Myung-bak's 'Global Korea' campaign, created to promote Korea to the foreign public (ibid., p. 104). With the increasing popularity of Korean culture globally and the rise of the popularity of public diplomacy as a diplomatic tool among Western countries, in 2010

President Lee Myung-bak's administration formulated Korea's first official public diplomacy strategy. It was formalised with the appointment of the first Ambassador for Public Diplomacy and the transition of 'the Bureau of Cultural Cooperation in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade [which] became the Cultural Affairs Bureau (the Bureau of Cultural Diplomacy in Korean), thus formalising the use of the term of cultural diplomacy in the Korean language' (Choi, 2019; 14). Later, The Bureau of Cultural Diplomacy was transformed into the Public Diplomacy and Cultural Affairs Bureau, and currently, that agency operates five divisions: Public Diplomacy, UNESCO, Cultural Cooperation, Regional Public Diplomacy, Public Diplomacy and Policy, and the People Diplomacy team (ibid.). The importance of public diplomacy in Korea's foreign policy strategy was cemented with the implementation of the 'Public Diplomacy Act' and the first 'Enforcement Decree of The Public Diplomacy Act' in 2016.

3.2.2 Korea's public diplomacy strategy today

Korea's public diplomacy strategy is outlined and codified in the Public Diplomacy Act (2016) and its Enforcement Decree (2016). Public Diplomacy Act defines public diplomacy as:

Diplomatic activities through which the State promotes foreign nationals' understanding of and enhance confidence in the Republic of Korea directly or in cooperation with local governments or the private sector based on culture, knowledge, policies, etc. (Public Diplomacy Act, 2016)

The Public Diplomacy Act considers the state, which in this case is synonymous with central government, as the leading actor responsible for conducting public diplomacy, while local governments and the public sector are considered as supporting bodies. Under this Act, the state must systematically establish and implement comprehensive strategies and policies to enhance Korea's public diplomacy. Beyond that, the state is required to formulate administrative and financial support plans, promote collaboration with local governments and the private sector, and encourage public participation in public diplomacy efforts to foster a shared understanding of the importance of public diplomacy.

Public Diplomacy Act and its Enforcement Decree list three core goals of Korea's public diplomacy strategy:

- To elevate Korea's international image and reputation.

- To foster a supportive global environment for Korean policies by directly communicating with foreign publics.
- To build trust and rapport with foreign nationals to increase Korea's influence on the world stage.

Three core principles guide all of those goals and the implementation of public diplomacy:

- Harmony between universal values and Korean characteristics.
- Focus on sustainable and friendly cooperation with the international community.
- Balanced geographic distribution of public diplomacy activities.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) is the main body responsible for planning and implementing governmental public diplomacy strategy. The ministry is tasked with the formulation of a master plan for public diplomacy every five years in cooperation with relevant bodies, outlined in the Public Diplomacy Act as: ‘the heads of related central administrative agencies, the Mayor of the Special Metropolitan City, Mayors of Metropolitan Cities, Mayors of Metropolitan Autonomous Cities, Governors of Provinces and the Governor of the Special Self-governing Province’ (hereinafter referred to collectively as ‘governmental bodies’). Additionally, to the master plan, an annual action plan has to be formulated by MOFA and reported on to the ministry by each governor. The implementation of and any alterations of the master plans are overlooked by the Public Diplomacy Committee established under the authority of MOFA.

The current 2nd Master Plan for Public Diplomacy (hereinafter: Master Plan), which outlines Korea’s goals and strategy for the years 2023-2027, builds on the foundation established by the first plan from years 2017-2022 and is adapted to a changing global political and social landscape (MOFA, 2023). The 2nd Master Plan is more relevant for this study as it focuses more heavily on the role of digitalisation in Korea’s public diplomacy strategy. Hence, only that document is summarised in this chapter. The 2nd Master Plan outlines three primary objectives designed to help Korea emerge as a ‘Global Pivotal State that contributes to the freedom, peace and prosperity in the world’ (MOFA, no date). It emphasises an increasingly important role that local governments, social media and new technologies must play in the strategy. The first goal of the Master Plan is to strengthen support for Korea's strategic national policies to enhance national interests. This can be achieved by actively engaging foreign audiences on policy matters crucial to South Korea. An example could be securing international support for a peaceful and denuclearised Korean peninsula, deepening

understanding of Korean policies among key nations and regions and positioning South Korea as a significant player in global governance while championing universal values. One example of the implementation of this goal is the KOREAZ project run by MOFA, which is discussed in more detail in section 3.3. The second goal is to elevate Korea's global status as a leader in science, technology, and culture. As a part of this objective, Korea aims to strengthen its position by sharing its knowledge and expertise in the fields of science and technology, promoting Korean studies and the Korean language, and disseminating a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the country. This goal highlights a chance Korea has to leverage the global popularity of its culture, which can, in turn, help the country foster positive perceptions of Korea and build a rapport with the foreign public worldwide. Finally, goal three aims to digitalise Korea's public diplomacy efforts by investing in innovative solutions such as AI and metaverse. It also calls for creating more engaging social media content to help Korea reach diverse global audiences and disseminate information effectively. To achieve that, the state should empower young people to participate in public diplomacy efforts, facilitate collaboration between government agencies, local governments, and the private sector, and strengthen the public diplomacy infrastructure. All of those goals are strongly embodied in the *Supporter Programs*.

The 2024 Public Diplomacy Action Plan (MOFA, 2024-b) builds upon the 2nd Master Plan and acts as a blueprint and guides public diplomacy implementation on a national and local scale. This plan outlines the following four core goals for the year 2024:

- Elevating South Korea's Global Standing.
- Expanding the Reach and Impact of Public Diplomacy.
- Harnessing the Power of K-Culture and Knowledge Diplomacy.
- Embracing Digital Innovation in Public Diplomacy.

Central to this implementation plan is the promotion of interactive cultural diplomacy by tailoring K-content for different countries and regions and hosting global cultural events to enhance Korea's global image. Through this plan, Korea also aims to expand its public diplomacy by creating opportunities for Korean citizens to participate in global engagement and to empower local governments to lead cultural exchange and develop international partnerships. *Supporter Programs* contribute to this goal by engaging the local public and facilitating cultural exchange. Additionally, the plan emphasises the need to leverage the global appeal of Korean culture by supporting initiatives like "Korea Weeks," and free

Korean language education provision abroad. It also highlights the need to combat misinformation about Korea by increasing the global publics' understanding of Korea's history and culture and effectively disseminating accurate information in the digital sphere. Lastly, the plan highlights the key role of digital innovations such as AI and metaverse, social media and other digital tools in public diplomacy. That can be achieved by targeted storytelling and using platforms and 'supporter' initiatives like KOREAZ to produce multilingual and audience-specific content to extend Korea's reach and influence.

3.3 Governmental Supporter Programs for Foreigners in Korea

One of the practical ways Korea has been implementing its public diplomacy strategy is through the *Supporter Programs*, which are the main subject of this study. The naming of those programs comes from the way the SMIs interviewed in this study described them. Used by them phrase *Supporter Program* is inspired by the word *supporter*, which is how organisers often refer to recruited participants. This is the case for the MOFA's KOREAZ program, which recruits *KOREAZ Supporters* (MOFA, 2024), the Busan Tourism Organization's program, which recruits *Busan Tourism Global Supporters* (Busan Metropolitan City, 2017) and most other similar initiatives. The word *supporters* is used when the campaign is promoted in English and Korean. When the initiatives are advertised in Korean, a Koreanised version of the word *supporters* is usually used, which is written in Korean as *서포터즈* [seopteojeu]. There are also other, less commonly used terms to describe recruited SMIs, for example, *friends* - as described in The Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism's program *Friends of Korea* (KCC, 2024), *mate* as in the name of Seoul's Global Seoul Mate program (Seoul Tourism Organisation, 2024), *Honorary Reporter* or *K-influencers* as in the program with the same names carried out by KOCIS (Korea.net, 2024), and *ambassador*, which was used, among the others, by Gyeonggi Province (Geonggi-do, 2024). All of those terms have a positive connotation. Some words, such as *supporter*, *ambassador* and *honorary reporter*, suggest that participants are supporting and promoting the country, while terms such as *friend*, or *mate* indicate a friendly relationship between the recruited people and the country or a specific region. While those terms are most commonly found when searching for *Supporter Programs*, some short-term programs, which recruit people just for a single trip or event, also refer to recruited people in more neutral terms, such as *digital creators*, *content creators* or just *creators* (Interesting Korea, 2024; Interesting Korea 2022).

The official public diplomacy framework, as outlined in Korea's Public Diplomacy Act and its enforcement decree, the 2nd Master Plan for Public Diplomacy, and the 2024 Public Diplomacy Action Plan, does not discuss *Supporter Programs* as a part of the official strategy. There is only one mention of the term *KOREAZ supporters* (MOFA's *Supporter Program*) in the Master Plan in the context of the importance of social media in public diplomacy, but it does not provide any substantial information nor name this type of activity. A comprehensive online search of governmental websites also did not lead to any specific findings on that matter. Considering the lack of official naming of those programs, the prevalence of the use of the word *supporters* over any other vocabulary to promote such programs, and the use of such vocabulary by participants of those programs, the name *Supporter Program* would be adapted in this research. *Supporter Programs*, in the context of this paper, describe any initiatives funded or organised by local or central governments or any governmental organisations, ministries or institutions (hereinafter referred to collectively as the *governmental bodies*), that recruit foreigners and foreign SMIs on a voluntary basis to promote a broadly defined Korea on social media in exchange for benefits such as free trips, certificates, merchandise, travel reimbursement and other. Such programs can be either directly organised by the governmental bodies, or delegated to private agencies or companies to conduct them in the name of the governmental bodies. *Korea*, in this definition, refers collectively to the country, including government, culture, language, population, and regions - including cities, provinces and anything else that can be directly associated with the Republic of Korea. In this research, the term *Supporter Programs* will be written with capital letters to reference the specific type of programs organised in Korea by the governmental bodies.

The initial plan for this research was to gather data on all metropolitan cities, metropolitan autonomous cities, special metropolitan cities, provinces and the special self-governing province to provide a detailed account of the prevalence of the use of *Supporter Programs* in Korea. However, this proved very challenging due to the time constraints of this research, the fragmented website history of many official governmental websites and agencies, and the lack of consistency in the naming of *Supporter Programs*, which makes the research complicated and lengthy. For example, some of the notices about *Supporter Programs* that were found while conducting this research were available only for a short time and deleted upon the end of the recruitment, which I noticed upon revisiting the pages after some time. This made data collection complex and showed that the lack of available online records does not mean an absolute lack of *Supporter Programs* in a region. Additionally, many programs are outsourced

to agencies and never advertised on official web pages of cities or provinces, making the search more complex or even impossible if the specific agency stopped existing in the meantime. While it is difficult to estimate how many of the provinces and cities use *Supporter Programs* as part of their public diplomacy efforts, the data that has been collected for this research shows that at least four provinces (Gyeongbuk, Jeollanam, Gangwon, Gyeonggi) and six cities (Seongju, Daegu, Tongyeong, Andong, Busan, Seoul) have implemented them. *Supporter Programs* organised by two other cities - Incheon and Makpo - have also been mentioned in interviews by SMIs, but I could not find any official information about them online. Hence, they are not included in this research data. Still, the data collected shows a substantial implementation of *Supporter Programs* by various provinces and cities, which aligns with the findings of Jin and Lee (2018). It also reflects the official state public diplomacy Master Plan that calls for an increased participation of local governments in the public diplomacy effort.

20 *Supporter Programs* were analysed in detail for this research. They are divided into two main categories - national and local programs, reflecting those initiatives' geographical reach. A complete list of analysed *Supporter Programs* is provided in Appendix 2. The final number of analysed initiatives was a result of several factors. Firstly, *Supporter Programs* had to meet all of the research criteria, which were developed in a cascading way based on the research questions, the type of SMIs that agreed to participate in interviews and the type of initiatives they participated in. Consequently, for the *Supporter Program* to be included in this analysis, the following criteria had to be met:

1. They had to be organised or funded by governmental bodies (local or central governments or any governmental organisations, ministries or institutions in Korea).
2. They had to be organised on the territory of Korea.
3. They had to recruit foreigners living in Korea as the main participants (initiatives that recruited both foreigners and Koreans were also included).
4. They had to require the creation of social media content as a condition for participation in the initiative.

These criteria helped ensure that only *Supporter Programs* that interviewees directly participated in or initiatives that follow a similar pattern are included in the research to guarantee the accuracy of findings. As a result, many similar initiatives, such as online programs by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (Honorary Reporters and K-

influencers), programs by Embassies of ROK organised around the world, and many other initiatives were excluded. However, the existence and prevalence of those initiatives organised by Korea on a global scale is unprecedented and deserves separate research to understand their impact. Another factor that influenced the number of *Supporter Programs* included in the analysis is the saturation point that was reached after identifying a high level of similarity between many of the selected initiatives - especially those organised on a local level. Lastly, the limited number of identified national *Supporter Programs* that meet the criteria impacted how many can be included in this study.

3.3.1 Typology of Supporter Programs

As mentioned earlier, identified *Supporter Programs* were divided into two main categories reflecting their geographical reach. Local initiatives included all *Supporter Programs* focused on promoting specific locations such as a city or a province and/or organised by local governments or governmental institutions. The national initiatives were organised by MOFA and the Korea Tourism Organisation (KTO) and focused on promoting the entire country, its various sites, and policies. While both national and local *Supporter Programs* in Korea utilise the rise of social media to promote the country, they tend to differ in scale, length and objectives. National *Supporter Programs* focus on shaping global perceptions of Korea and advancing national interests by promoting Korea as a whole, encompassing its tourism and culture (KTO's programs), policies, and global vision (MOFA's programs). They tend to run for several months at a time and recruit more supporters for each edition (on average 49 participants) than most of the Local *Supporter Programs* (on average 20 participants), except Global Seoul Mate, which recruits 150 people (Seoul Tourism Organisation, no date). Despite extensive research, only five national initiatives were identified, three run by the Korea Tourism Organisation and two by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Programs organised by MOFA stand out among the identified *Supporter Programs* as they focus predominantly on the promotion of Korea's foreign policies, while most other *Supporter Programs* focus on the promotion of tourism and culture. For example, MOFA's *KOREAZ* is originally the name of 'the social media channel for Korea's public diplomacy, [where] MOFA releases customised digital content targeting global audiences to promote universal values and Korea's vision of Global Pivotal State.', as described on MOFA's website (MOFA, no date-d). This platform has an associated program called the *KOREAZ Supporters Program*, which recruits both foreigners and Koreans to create social media content for the *KOREAZ* platform and social media accounts and promote its content online. This is the only *Supporter Program*

mentioned in Korea's Public Diplomacy Master Plan (MOFA, 2023) and on MOFA's official website (MOFA, no date-e). KTO's *Supporter Programs* are focused predominantly on promoting Korea's tourism and culture, and they send participants on short trips to different parts of Korea every month to promote them as tourist destinations. KTO runs separate programs for people of different nationalities. For example, WOW Korea is targeting people from Southeast Asia, Western Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East (Center for International Affairs, 2023), while Adventure Korea recruits people from Europe, America and Oceania (Adventure Korea, 2024). During the research, I was unable to find any KTO initiatives targeting people from other regions than the ones mentioned; however, according to Interviewee 2, there are also specific initiatives by KTO that target people in Japan and China, respectively. Those programs are likely to be advertised in the languages of those countries, which is why I could not confirm that during the research process.

In contrast, local *Supporter Programs* focus primarily on promoting specific regions, their culture, and travel attractions instead of promoting state policies, except for the Gyeonggi province's program, which does both. While they focus on promoting local tourism instead of the country as a whole, they still considerably contribute to Korea's public diplomacy. That can happen in various ways, among others, by increasing the overall amount of social media coverage about the country, projecting a positive image of Korea and increasing its soft power by facilitating cultural exchange, showcasing beautiful landscapes and building rapport with foreigners, and by teaching foreigners about local customs and traditions. Those local programs are usually managed by local tourism organisations or provincial or city governments, and they range in length from long-term programs, which run anywhere from six months to 24 months, and short-term ones that last for a few days. Those programs focus on boosting tourism and showcasing the unique attractions and experiences within a specific province or city. Based on the interviews and my research conducted on Instagram while looking for these initiatives, the content that participants of those programs produce typically highlights local landmarks, festivals, cultural events, and activities unique to the region. An example of a local program is *Global Seoul Mates* (GSM), organised in the past by the Seoul Metropolitan Government and currently by the Seoul Tourism Organisation. It is the biggest and longest-running of the analysed programs, as the first identified edition was held in 2012 (Korea Observer, 2013). As of 2024, the initiative recruited 150 participants (Seoul Tourism Organisation, 2024). GSM gives participants monthly missions focused on promoting Seoul in different ways for a total of 8 months, for which they are reimbursed at a flat monthly rate,

according to Interviewee 2. An example of a short local initiative is the 3-day *Tongyeong Workation Program* sponsored by Tongyeong City and organised by a private agency, Interesting Korea (Interesting Korea, 2023-b). This initiative targets digital nomads, who are expected to promote the city as a perfect base for people who work remotely in Korea. This small initiative recruited only eight foreigners and was one of a few that openly mentioned the preferred minimal follower count of participants' social media accounts (at least 2,000).

In general, there are several similarities between all types of *Supporter Programs*. Depending on the organiser, they typically require participants to create diverse forms of online content, including images, videos, short-form videos (reels or shorts), and written reviews on social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube or other portals. Participating foreigners are then tasked with the dissemination of created by themselves content through personal social media accounts, extending the reach of promotional efforts beyond official government channels. The overarching theme of the content is dictated by organisers and depends on the structure of the program. Some programs take participants on specifically designed trips and invite them to selected cultural activities (Interesting Korea, 2023; Interesting Korea, 2023-a; Funday Korea Network, 2023), while others assign a mission, which participants have to complete of their own accord within a specific time frame each month (Seoul Tourism Organisation, 2024; Seoul Korea, 2024). Some long-term initiatives combine the two approaches. Additionally, some *Supporter Programs*, such as the *Daegu & Gyeongbuk Global Tourism Supporters Program*, require participants to act as consultants and conduct an 'analysis of domestic tourism policies and suggestions for Daegu tourism' (Interesting Korea, 2024-a), or as in the case of the Gyeonggi Province Honorary Ambassador initiative, to 'advise on policies and promotional activities' (Geonggi-do, 2024). Hence, participating foreigners act both as region promoters and advisors for the organising governmental body.

While each *Supporter Program's* mission statement is different, they all share an overarching goal of promoting Korea or any specific region and its culture on social media. The language used in mission statements often promises engaging experiences to participants and encourages them to explore and promote Korea's best sites and culture to their audiences. All of that is often expressed with an upbeat and exciting tone. The mission statements are only different for MOFA's programs as they also focus on promoting Korea's policies alongside culture and tourism. For example, KTO stated in their recruitment notice for the *KTO SNS Supporters* program that they sought participants who 'love travel and want to introduce

various aspects of Korea to the world!’ (Gangnam Global Village Center, 2021). Similarly, the Seoul Metropolitan Government’s program *Souliters* invites participants to ‘introduce the charming city of Seoul to the world from the perspective of Seouliters.’ (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2024). The objective of most programs is to promote tourism and culture of Korea or specific localities, with only a few exceptions, such as MOFA programs, which tend to be focused on promoting Korea’s policies and Korea as a Global Pivotal State (MOFA, 2024; MOFA, 2023-a), or the Gyeonggi Province Honorary Ambassador initiative also requires participants to disseminate the disaster safety and administrative news (Geonggi-do, 2024).

Supporter Programs are advertised in various ways to attract participants. Most commonly, they are promoted on social media, where their target audience is. Each *Supporter Program* is individually advertised on the organiser’s social media accounts, whether that is a governmental body or a subcontracted agency. Beyond that, opportunities are often promoted by participating SMIs who sometimes make dedicated posts with a review of their experience or promote openings of new *Supporter Programs* to their followers. Besides social media, opportunities are also posted on organisers’ websites and notice boards, and some are on notice boards of universities or partner organisations.

Supporter Programs usually offer a mix of financial rewards, experiential benefits and gifts to incentivise and encourage participation. Financial incentives include reimbursement of travel costs associated with self-organised trips, providing monthly stipends for covering activity fees and offering prizes for high-quality content. According to interviewees 2 and 3, payments or reimbursements for activity fees can be received in cash for holders of visa types that allow foreigners to work and receive payment for services or in the form of vouchers to department stores for those who do not have the right to work. On the other hand, experiential benefits focus on engaging participants directly with Korean culture and society. That includes opportunities to participate in fully funded trips to explore various destinations, access to festivals or exclusive events organised by government bodies or tourism organisations, and the opportunity to attend opening and closing ceremonies of *Supporter Programs*. In addition to these tangible rewards, participants might be offered a chance to develop their content creation skills through provided workshops, build international connections, and, at times have increased access to various venues and events by receiving official Reporters Press Cards. Lastly, most of the programs also offer gifts in the form of branded merchandise with organisers’ logos, products provided by companies sponsoring the trips, and certificates of

appointment and completion to acknowledge SMIs' contributions. However, none of the 20 analysed *Supporter Programs* offered visas or official employment contracts, so those programs are not a gateway to long-term living legally in Korea.

All *Supporter Programs* organisers look for a similar type of foreigners when recruiting participants. Firstly, they tend to seek foreigners living in Korea rather than tourists, which indicates that they seek to engage those who commit to Korea long-term. None of the analysed programs restricted specific visa-type holders from participating, meaning everyone who can prove their legal status in Korea can join, besides tourists. Secondly, most programs advertise that they search for people interested in Korea and its culture and keen to travel around the country. Understandably, the target group of those programs are K-enthusiasts who have some level of familiarity with the country and are likely to want to promote it. Thirdly, all recruitment notices listed 'active use of social media' as a core requirement for participants, with six *Supporter Programs* also specifying the preferred follower/subscriber count SMIs should have on their social media accounts. Those varied between 1,000 and 5,000 followers or subscribers. Interviewee 2 mentioned in the interview that most programs she participated in have a minimum requirement of 500 followers. Some programs also listed a requirement or preference for people who are good at creating social media content. This shows that while some organisers target skilled content creators with a significant following, most programs accept a variety of people, as well as those who have small accounts or only start their journey with content creation.

While there are a lot of structural similarities between *Supporter Programs*, and they all share a goal of promoting Korea on social media, they do not seem to be a part of a coordinated strategy. Instead, it appears as a case of different governmental bodies replicating success stories of other regions or organisations and capitalising on the growing popularity of social media, which is especially visible in Korea. As mentioned earlier, only one *Supporter Program* is very briefly mentioned in the entire 2nd Master Plan for Public Diplomacy and Action Plan for 2024, and no further guidelines or recommendations for implementing *Supporter Programs* are outlined in an official public diplomacy agenda. However, *Supporter Programs* incorporate several goals outlined in the 2nd Master Plan, which can explain why they are readily implemented across Korea. Those goals include, among others, increased participation of local governments in the state public diplomacy efforts, building partnerships with local organisations that promote Korean culture and values, increasing the use of social media as a medium for public diplomacy dissemination, and building sustainable and friendly

partnership with the foreign community to increase support for Korea. Additionally, beyond the official guidelines, the steady increase in popularity of social media globally and the trend of using SMIs in marketing globally, which was described in detail in Chapter 2, can also explain why the *Supporter Programs* are a commonly implemented solution in Korea. However, not only the geographical reach but also the repetitiveness of editions of *Supporter Programs* indicates their pervasiveness. The first edition of Seoul's *GSM* program happened in 2012, and the program is still running its annual editions in 2024. *WOW Korea* has run for 12 editions, and MOFA has recruited supporters continuously since 2020 through the *KOREAZ* and *Allimi* programs. Most of the analysed in this study long programs that run for several months at the time, tend to have at least two editions. Although all identified short-term programs have just one edition, some cities that organise them, such as Daegu or Tongyeong, do so repeatedly with different themes. The prevalence of *Supporter Programs* in Korea indicates that they must bring significant value to Korea's public diplomacy efforts. More details on *Supporter Programs* are outlined in Appendix 2.

4 Research Design and Fieldwork

This paper was developed based on qualitative research conducted on self-collected primary data and secondary sources. The primary data was collected in two ways. Firstly, by collecting data on *Supporter Programs* through web-based research, which is introduced in section 3.3. Secondly, in the form of in-person and online semi-structured interviews with foreign SMIs and participant observations collected during the fieldwork in Korea, which are both explained in this chapter. The first part of the chapter explains the methodology of collecting the data for this research, including the preparation and pilot study, the process of selecting the qualitative semi-structured interviews as the mode of collecting data, the interview content analysis method, and the research ethics. The second part of the chapter provides insights into the process of conducting the fieldwork, including conducting interviews and observing the participation of foreign SMIs in the official initiatives for foreign SMIs in Korea.

4.1 Methodology

According to Knott et al., qualitative interviews are best suited for research that aims to explore complex social phenomena and gain an in-depth understanding of individual experiences and perspectives (2022, p. 1). Considering that the first two research questions of this study focus on the subjective motivations, experiences and perceptions of foreign SMIs participating in *Supporter Programs* in Korea, conducting interviews was the most suited research method. The open-ended nature of semi-structured interviews encouraged participants to share their experiences and perspectives in their own words, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of their motivations, experiences and perceptions. Additionally, a small element of participant observation was incorporated into this study due to an opportunity to join one of the interviewees during her participation in one of the *Supporter Programs*' missions. Consequently, this is an ethnographic study that derives data from interviews and participant observations. However, it needs to be acknowledged that with the use of qualitative methods, the presented results cannot be generalised or representative of the broader group of foreign social media influencers.

4.1.1 Preparation for data collection and pilot study

In preparation for conducting interviews and collecting the primary data, I first attended the ethnographic research module at the University of Turku to better understand how to conduct

successful semi-structured interviews. In the Spring of 2024, I conducted fieldwork in Korea during my student exchange. In preparation for the interviews, I compiled a list of over 19 questions designed to gather data on the motivations and experiences of foreign SMIs participating in *Supporter Programs*, their social media journeys, and general experiences in Korea. All questions are listed in Appendix 1.

Additionally, during this stage, I prepared relevant paperwork, including the 'Participant Information Sheet' and 'Informed Consent Form', both of which are discussed in more detail in section 2.1.4. After this initial phase, a pilot study was conducted to ensure that the prepared interview questions were well constructed. The pilot study consisted of one semi-structured interview with a person who fitted the criteria of a foreign SMI adopted by this study. Since the person interviewed for the pilot was not in Korea at the time of the interview, I conducted it online through a Google Meets platform. The entire interview was audio-recorded and then analysed to understand if there was a need for any adjustment in the interview questions or the interview format. After the analysis of the pilot interview, no further changes were implemented to the questions, and the interview proved to have much substantial information; hence, the pilot study was included in the study results.

4.1.2 Use of qualitative semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection

This research employed semi-structured interviews as the main mode of collecting primary data. The flexibility of this interviewing style dictated this choice, as it allows one to explore pre-determined themes while also pursuing new avenues that emerge during the conversation. I adopted a responsive interviewing approach, which involves adapting questions based on the participants' responses, allowing for a deeper exploration of their experiences and perspectives and building a stronger rapport with participants. I used the interpretive constructionist paradigm as a guiding approach to interviewing, as it helps understand the experiences and perspectives of interviewed foreign SMIs in Korea. It is the most suitable approach because it focuses on the subjective experiences of people and how individuals perceive and interpret events (Rubin & Rubin, 2004). It also allows the possibility for multiple, co-existing truths and values to exist in one sphere, depending on everybody's individual and subjective experience (ibid.).

The target population of this research are foreign nationals living in Korea who are active on social media and can be described as SMIs as per the definitions provided in Chapter 3. To be considered for the interview, interviewees additionally had to have participated in at least one

Supporter Program. Considering a detailed specification of the target audience, a purposive sampling method was adopted to ensure that all the required criteria were met. This method helped ensure that the sample consisted of individuals with direct experience and profiles relevant to the research. Identifying relevant participants was straightforward because of my interest in Korea and the extensive use of social media in private life, which was also how this research topic was initially identified. I first encountered the information about *the Supporter Program* through a post on Instagram by a foreigner living there whom I followed. After exploring this one initiative (Global Seoul Mate), it became apparent that a few other foreign content creators living in Korea who I followed, also participated in the same or similar initiatives. This became both a way in which the research topic was formed, and relevant interview participants were identified. After the research began, I conducted further research on Instagram and online to identify more initiatives for foreigners and more participants of these initiatives who were the target group of this research. In total, over 30 people were contacted, which resulted in four interviews. The majority of people contacted did not respond, while some provided reasons for their lack of willingness to participate, which included scheduling conflicts and unwillingness to participate without compensation. Consequently, the sample is small but still provides a relevant and diverse range of answers. Initially, no specific demographic criteria were employed to select candidates beyond the fact that each interviewee had to be a foreigner living in South Korea. People from at least three continents were contacted, but finally, only people from Europe were interviewed as the only ones who responded to the invitation and agreed to participate. Considering that the same messages were sent to every person, this outcome could be a result of many factors, including the personal preferences of the participants or even my identity as a researcher. Demographic details of participants were collected through the demographic data form (Appendix 7) to ensure the validity of findings and help analyse any potential patterns. Demographic information of interviewed SMIs is listed in Appendix 3. Upon analysing the demographic data, no patterns were identified, which could be a result of both the small sample and diversity of SMIs participating in Supporter Programs. While the goal of this research was to interview around 10 people or to continue interviews until reaching the saturation point, the final number of interviewees was dictated by the response rate and the time limitations, as all the interviews were planned to take place during the academic exchange in Korea, which took place in spring 2024.

4.1.3 Interview content analysis method

This research focuses on a novel and, so far, little-researched concept of foreign audiences acting both as recipients and producers of public diplomacy for the foreign country and their motivations and experience of acting as such. As the main goal is to understand perceptions and experiences and to explore underlying motivations and meanings, the most suitable method of analysing the interview content is the thematic analysis. According to Knott et al., thematic analysis goes beyond simply describing what participants say (2022, p. 7-8). It involves carefully examining the data to identify recurring patterns of meaning that offer insights into the discussed topics (ibid.). These patterns are referred to as *themes*. The theme analysis was selected instead of the more basic content analysis, as it focuses on understanding the underlying ideas and experiences reflected in the answers instead of primarily focusing on identifying and quantifying specific words and phrases (ibid. p. 7). In the context of this research, which focuses on subjective experiences and motivations, analysing the underlying meanings and overall themes is a more suitable approach than simply focusing on explicit meanings.

The themes were identified using an abductive approach, which combines aspects of both deductive and inductive reasoning (Knott et al., 2022, p. 9). This approach enables flexibility to begin with a deductive approach guided by a selected theory but also to remain open to new themes that might go beyond the scope of the selected theory. This research adopted a Social Exchange Theory as a theoretical framework, which was used as a starting point for identifying themes for data coding and analysis. Throughout the process of data analysis, additional themes were identified due to the application of inductive reasoning. All themes are outlined in Appendix 4. After initial consideration of using coding software such as NVivo for data management and analysis, it became apparent that manual coding would be a more practical approach to identifying underlying meanings and themes. The themes were identified using the manual colour-coding method, which enabled the identification of key concepts, themes, and patterns. Finally, the codes were manually refined by relabelling, merging, and splitting them to ensure conceptual clarity and consistency across the dataset, which enabled the formulation of final findings. The entire transcribing and coding process took place after the return from the academic exchange in South Korea.

4.1.4 Ethics of the research

This research follows ‘The Finnish code of conduct for research integrity and procedures for handling alleged violations of research integrity in Finland’ compiled by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK (2023) - a guideline recommended by the University of Turku. Consequently, the main principles that guided this research were reliability, honesty, respect and accountability, as outlined in the guidelines. All necessary precautions were taken to ensure that the research was conducted ethically, protecting all the participants and adhering to the above-mentioned principles.

All the participants of the research received a two-page information sheet (Appendix 5) that they were asked to read before the start of the official part of the interview to ensure they were fully informed about what their participation in the research and interview entails, what are their rights as participants and the clause that states that they can withdraw their participation and seek the return of their data and answers at any time. The sheet additionally included provisions about me as a researcher and my affiliation, the purpose of the research, how the data collected during the interview will be stored, used and for how long it will be stored. All participants also signed an ‘Informed Consent Form’ (Appendix 6) where they were able to decide how they would be identified in the research and provided consent for using their answers for the purpose of conducting this research. All of the interviews were recorded in an audio version and are stored alongside the signed ‘Informed Consent Forms’ and collected demographic data on my personal and password-protected device and the Seafile online disc. Seafile is a cloud storage system that is officially provided by the University of Turku, and as it stores all the information on servers in Finland, it is secure and helps ensure that the data is safely stored.

4.2 Fieldwork in Korea

The process of collecting qualitative primary data was carried out predominantly during my exchange in South Korea in the spring of 2024. I arrived in Korea in late February 2024 to spend one semester studying at Kyung Hee University in Seoul and began the data collection and interview phase soon after that. This phase included researching *Supporter Programs* that match the criteria of this research, identifying the sample group for interviews, getting in touch with potential participants of the study and holding interviews with confirmed participants. *Supporter Programs* were identified via several channels, including social media

posts of already identified foreign SMIs, who at times shared information about existing opportunities, hashtag search, google search, a search of official governmental websites, including those of local municipalities, ministries, official tourism organisations, MOFA, KOCIS and websites of private organisers whom the government hires to organise initiatives. All information about programs was collected from the official programs' recruitment announcements, application forms (those are only available when the programs are actively recruiting), social media posts of the organisers and websites of universities or other institutions that promoted some specific programs. While many online sources used to gather information on *Supporter Programs* are still available online, some were already deleted by organisers and are no longer accessible online.

4.2.1 Interviews with foreign SMIs in Korea

In total, four interviews were scheduled, including the pilot study. All foreign SMIs were contacted directly through direct messages on Instagram. Every person received a similar message, with only a slight personalisation, to ensure that everybody got the same amount of information. I coincidentally met one of the interviewees before scheduling the interviews, while they were fulfilling one of the missions for the *Supporter Program*, which helped me build an initial rapport and led to scheduling my first in-person interview. With the remaining two interviewees I met for the first time during the interview.

Table 1: Interview details.

Interviewee assigned number	Method	Location	Date	Duration
1	Online	Google Meets	16 March 2024	28:25
2	Face-to-face	Cafe	14 April 2024	1:19:26
3	Face-to-face	Cafe	17 May 2024	29:42
4	Face-to-face	Cafe	30 May 2024	46:05

All in-person interviews took place in cafes in Seoul, which were identified as the most convenient and safe options. All the interviews were conducted in English and audio recorded after receiving verbal and written consent from participants. The style of interviews was informal, and each participant seemed comfortable and mostly relaxed. While being in a cafe meant that we did not have complete privacy, discussed topics were not touching on any controversial or deeply personal topics; hence, nobody looked uncomfortable with sharing information and answering questions in that setting. While at times there were slight signs of

hesitation or short pauses during some parts of some of the interviews, for the most part, participants looked open to sharing information, their knowledge and experiences. Considering that the interviews were recorded, and that building rapport was an important part of the interview, note-taking was kept to a minimum during the interviews. All of the interviews were transcribed and analysed manually after the return from the exchange.

Four foreign SMIs living in Korea were interviewed for this study. The interview sample is considerably small and offers limited geographical diversity as all interviewees come from Northern and Eastern Europe. However, it represents foreigners with much diversity in terms of their reasons for coming to and living in Korea, as shown through their visa types and occupations. This also became apparent in their motivations to participate in the *Supporter Programs*, which are discussed in Chapter 5. Three females and one male were interviewed, representing people in their twenties, thirties, and forties. Only one person considered herself a full-time SMI, while others saw this as a hobby or additional work. The sample shows vast differences in the number of programs attended per participant and their follower count on social media (table 2), showing their varying levels of investment in their activity on social media. Regarding the number of attended by SMIs *Supporter Programs*, only two interviewees could provide a specific number. The other two were unsure about the number due to the many activities they participated in. Interviewee 3 provided a rough number, but Interviewee 4 could not estimate it and answered, 'So many. There are like too many'. It is worth noting that two interviewees started to post regularly about Korea on social media primarily due to their participation in *Supporter Programs* (Interviewees 2 and 3). While they had personal social media accounts prior to participating in *Supporter Programs*, those were small accounts only for staying in touch with their personal networks, not to gain a following. Participation in *Supporter Programs* motivated them to build up their following and more regular content about Korea. The smallest account represented in this research belonged to a nano-influencer with around 700 followers, while the remaining interviewees are micro-influencers with follower counts between 9,000 and 46,000.

The limited geographical variance of the nationalities of SMIs recruited for this research is partially an outcome of *Supporter Programs* that I, as a researcher, was able to identify and analyse. My research was conducted mainly in English and partially in Korean so I could identify predominantly initiatives targeted toward a specific set of nationalities. *Supporter Programs* that target people in countries such as Japan or China are often advertised in those countries' languages, limiting my access to them. Therefore, all initiatives advertised and

promoted in languages other than English or Korean and their participants are excluded from this research due to a language barrier.

Table 2: Interviewees' SOCIAL MEDIA Presence and Participation in Supporter Programs.

No.	Number of attended Supporter Programs	Approximate no. of followers on the main Instagram account ⁴	Number of posts on the main Instagram account ⁵	Main reason for starting to regularly post about Korea on social media.
1	1	700	650+	Personal diary / posting for close networks
2	6	9,000	450+	Supporter Programs
3	At least 10	13,000	1,400+	Supporter Programs
4	The answer provided: 'so many'	46,000	1,600+	Hobby

4.2.2 Participation in Supporter Program with a foreign SMI

One of the interviewees offered to hold an interview immediately after she participated in an activity, which is part of a *Supporter Program* she was a part of, and she invited me to join that event with her. This was an opportunity to learn more about how the interviewee experiences a *Supporter Program* in person and how it relates to her answers in the interview. The activity took the form of visiting an interactive pop-up store, and it was organised by the Sejong Centre for the Performing Arts as a part of their *Supporter Program*. This program does not fit all of the criteria of this research, as it is not geared toward attracting foreigners, even though foreigners can apply if they are able to complete the application and activities in the Korean language. However, besides not targeting foreigners, it follows most of the same principles as activities researched in this study. Additionally, it is organised by a governmental body since the Sejong Center for the Performing Arts was created and is managed by the Seoul Metropolitan City. Considering the value that observing the SMI's direct participation in the *Supporter Program* activity brings to this research, my experience of participating in this activity was included in this research despite the program not meeting all of the criteria of this research.

We met with Interviewee 3 by the metro station and walked together to the pop-up, which was an opportunity to ask questions about the activity and how the interviewee got involved in it. The pop-up of the Sejong Center for the Performing Arts was set up to promote the activities

⁴ Followers count as of December 11, 2024. The count is rounded to closes 100 or 1,000.

⁵ Number of social media posts as of December 11, 2024. The count is rounded to the closes 100 or 1,000.

of the organisation, and the SMIs were invited there as one of their program missions to promote the store and the organisation on social media. The pop-up was in a large building with several activities that visitors could participate in, such as colouring, playing games, reading about upcoming performances and leaving messages for the artists.

Additionally, there was a chance to win prizes after playing a game and an opportunity to receive complimentary snacks and merchandise after completing all prepared activities. Even before entering the shop, the interviewee showed their invitation, which included a +1, so we were able to enter the shop promptly. Even before entering the main building, the interviewee started to take pictures and videos, which was content that she could then use on social media to complete her mission. While inside, we participated in each prepared activity after being assisted by staff, but it was hard to gauge if the interviewee was enjoying her time or if she simply did all the activities out of a sense of duty to the organisation or me as a researcher. After completing each activity, we collected stamps, which were then exchanged for the earlier-mentioned refreshments and merchandise. To receive the last stamp, we were required to post about our presence in the pop-up on social media, which we both did. While exiting the venue, the interviewee had a chat with the organiser, who was also in charge of working with recruited social media supporters, and after that, the interviewee took even more pictures and videos of the pop-up. The interviewee shared later that although she had already completed all the commitments associated with this program and was no longer required to visit the pop-up, she did that as she genuinely wanted to promote that organisation and their cause. This showed her sense of commitment and overall satisfaction with the program, even if she did not seem excessively happy during the visit in the pop-up. This unplanned fieldwork element of joining the SMI and participating in a *Supporter Program* activity proved to be a significant addition and aided some of the findings, which are described in Chapter 5 in detail. The data on this part of fieldwork was collected in the form of notes written the same day after the meeting with the interviewee. The notes were reviewed in the same manner and at the same time as interviews and, consequently, were included in the findings.

5 Results and Analysis

This chapter outlines the main findings of this research, presented in three sections. Each part represents an answer to one research question and is divided into subsections corresponding to level 1 themes identified through qualitative research. Levels 2 and 3 are selectively discussed in detail in each relevant segment, depending on their relevance and significance. A detailed outline of all themes identified through the thematic analysis of the qualitative interviews is attached in Appendix 4. Section 5.1 discusses the motivations for and experience of foreign SMIs living in Korea who participated in governmental *Supporter Programs*. The themes discussed in its subsections were identified primarily using deductive reasoning based on the Social Exchange Theory – a theoretical framework adopted in this study. Section 5.2 explains how participation in *Supporter Programs* affects SMIs' perception of Korea and their experience of living there. Incorporating this research question into this paper resulted from an inductive analysis of interviews, which suggests that the experience of participating in governmental *Supporter Programs* affects not only how foreigners view Korea but also their life and process of acclimatising to the country. Consequently, this section will discuss the concept of *comparison level* derived from Social Exchange Theory, foreign SMIs' understanding and perception of Korea, and the impact participation in *Supporter Programs* has on foreigners' lives there. Lastly, section 5.3 discusses the *Supporter Programs'* role in Korea's public diplomacy strategy.

5.1 Foreign SMIs' motivations for and experience of participating in governmental *Supporter Programs* in Korea

This section explores the motivations of foreign SMIs to participate in governmental *Supporter Programs* in Korea and their experience of being a part of it. It is presented in two subsections modelled on the first research question. Section 5.1.1 explores the motivations of foreigners to participate in *Supporter Programs*. The subsequent subsection, 5.1.2, focuses on the foreigners' experience of participating in *Supporter Programs* through two lenses: (1) costs and rewards and (2) reciprocity and commitment stability.

5.1.1 Motivations

Considering the limited sample of foreign SMIs, many motivations to participate in governmental *Supporter Programs* were identified (Table 3). They are categorised into six groups: (1) financial, (2) travel and exploration, (3) social, (4) entertainment, (5) intrinsic, and

(6) prestige. While some motivations were mentioned only by one person, others were shared by the majority or all interviewees. There is a significant discrepancy between the number of motivations mentioned by Interviewee 1, who participated in only one short-term *Supporter Program* and mentioned three motivations, and the rest, who participated in multiple shorter and longer-term programs and mentioned between five and twelve of them. This indicates that people who had a chance to try different kinds of initiatives were able to identify more value in the programs. All four interviewees agreed that finance (free trips/activities) and travel and exploration (safe way to travel, way to find and reach new places, etc.) were the two most important motivations for their participation. Everyone also acknowledged that while they were technically paying for trips and provided activities by creating social media content, they still deemed it a financially beneficial arrangement for them because of all the benefits provided, such as free trips with all costs covered, free tickets to concerts or festival, or other things that otherwise are costly. This is explained by interviewees 2 and 3.

Interviewee 2: It is definitely a privilege to have it free, right? Well, it is not technically free because you create content. It is not free, but it is a privilege to have it organised for you. Because, you know, if you are not as good in Korean as you wish to be, it is harder to travel.

Interviewer: ‘What factors motivate you to participate or keep on participating [in those initiatives]?’

Interviewee 3: ‘All opportunities, actually. The trips or things you could participate in, like festivals and entrance tickets. Some of the things I could experience thanks to the Supporters Programs, I could not experience myself because I basically would not be able to afford it.’

Travel and exploration were mentioned in several ways as motivating factors for participating in *Supporter Programs*. In this category, interviewees were highly motivated by a chance to explore places that were previously unreachable or hard to access (3 interviewees), a chance to find new interesting places (3 interviewees), and the fact that the itinerary was prepared for them by organisers (2 interviewees). Additionally, interviewee 2 acknowledged that the *Supporter Programs* are a chance for her to start feeling safe while travelling around the country and a motivation to go out and explore beyond the *Supporter Programs*. Besides those two categories, social aspects were the third most mentioned type of motivation. Three out of four interviewees, all of whom participated in multiple programs, mentioned that those trips are a chance to network, get to know new people and build a community of friends. Interviewees 2 and 3 acknowledged gaining some of their first friends by participating in the *Supporter Programs*.

Interviewee 2: And it was later that I realised that it is also like the first way, the first legit way, I actually got friends here. (...) It was my introduction to foreign community as well.

Interviewee 3: And also meeting with other people, because most of my friends I made in Korea were the friends I made through the Supporters Programs.

Interviewee 4 acknowledged that meeting ‘interesting people’ was one of his main motivations and mentioned an example of a networking opportunity created by participation in a *Supporter Program*.

Interviewee 4: I think the MOFA program was pretty nice. (...) They sometimes combine the trips of creators with [people from] foreign missions. So, you get to know interesting people. (...) You find yourself in an interesting place, somewhere in the mountains, with not many people around, so you end up talking to each other. Otherwise, you will not talk to each other. So, yeah, I think this was pretty interesting.

Table 3: Motivations to participate in governmental Supporter Programs in Korea per interviewee.

Category	Motivation	16	2	3	4
Financial	Free trips	X	X	X	X
Financial	Free tickets to concerts/festivals and other cultural events.		X	X	
Travel and exploration	Opportunity to explore places that were previously unreachable or hard to access.	X	X		X
Travel and exploration	A safe way of travelling.		X		
Travel and exploration	Finding new interesting places to explore.		X	X	X
Travel and exploration	It motivates to try new things.		X		
Travel and Exploration	Everything is organised, so I do not have to plan the trips myself.	X	X		
Social	Chance to network and build community.		X	X	X
Social	My community members' participation motivates me to also apply.			X	
Entertainment	Way to use free time.		X		X
Intrinsic	Positive past experiences encourage me to apply again.		X	X	
Prestige	The wording used to name participants, such as 'ambassadors' is appealing.		X		
Prestige	Certificates for participation and completion of the program.		X		

⁶ Numbers in the last four columns correspond to the number assigned to each interviewee.

Another interesting finding was the primary motivation mentioned by Interviewee 2, who expressed that prestige was the main driver for her participation.

Interviewee 2: So, my first motivation was, I think... They just sold it, you know? The ambassador kind of thing. And I love certificates and collecting them. (...) I mean, BTS is still an ambassador, and I am an ambassador. [laugh] That is selling. (...) It is a positive connotation that I actually really like and something that I can brag about. It is like a breaking point.

It is essential to acknowledge that most interviewees had a largely positive experience living in Korea before and after participating in the *Supporter Programs*, which might have significantly impacted their answers. Only Interviewee 1 expressed that her time in Korea was ‘bitter-sweet’, but even she mainly spoke favourably about the *Supporter Program* she participated in.

5.1.2 Foreign SMIs’ Experience of Participating in Supporter Programs: Costs & Rewards Analysis and Reciprocity & Commitment Stability

In general, there is an agreement between interviewed SMIs that the *Supporter Programs* overall are a positive sum game, with many rewards compared with the costs. However, everyone also agreed that there is room for improvement regarding the costs associated with participation. Three interviewees who participated repeatedly agreed that the overall experience and satisfaction with programs depend highly on the organiser. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the implementation of most of the *Supporter Programs* is delegated by the governmental bodies to private agencies. This leads to a large discrepancy in the experiences offered and costs associated with participation in different *Supporter Programs*, which, according to Interviewee 4, negatively impacts the quality of programs:

Interviewee 4: It is really a pity, but like these agencies can make it or break it. And most of the time, they break it.

Most mentioned by interviewees shortcomings of the *Supporter Programs* are: (1) rushed schedule, (2) sending trip schedules to participants on short notice, (3) nitpicking on the prepared by participants social media content or (4) demanding more content than originally agreed on. The main cost that all participants of *Supporter Programs* have to bear is the creation of social media content. None of the interviewees regarded the sole responsibility of content creation as a considerable burden. However, two out of four SMIs expressed that some agencies are overbearing with the requests made about the produced content or asked

for more content that initially agreed on⁷. Although the interviews indicate that this approach to participants is not a norm, it considerably affected SMIs' experience and perception of some specific *Supporter Programs*, as explained by Interviewee 3.

Interviewee 3: I feel like sometimes organisations can take advantage of people, especially the new ones. They are like, 'We brought you on a free trip, so you have to create this content for months coming', even though it is not related to the trip. So that one was one of the worst experiences. And I think that is why the program does not exist anymore, because so many people [SMIs] had the same idea. (...) I feel like there should be balance between the work you do and the incentive you get.

Another commonly mentioned cost SMIs bear is the stress and negative experiences associated with the fast pace of organised trips. Interviewee 4 mentioned that participants refer to those activities as *banner trips* because they 'go and just spread a banner, and move, and spread a banner' to take pictures. All four interviewees agreed that those fast-paced trips negatively affect their experience, and some also agreed that it makes them less motivated to post good quality content about those activities. Lastly, two interviewees mentioned that some organisers give very short notice for when the trips or activities start or take place, affecting participants' private schedules. This can be considered another cost that foreign SMIs bear when joining *Supporter Programs*.

The most mentioned benefits of the *Supporter Programs* overlap significantly with the motivations listed in section 5.1.1 and include access to free trips, tickets to festivals, concerts and other attractions, the ability to explore new and not easily accessible places, a chance to meet new people, and a chance to build a community. These factors alone outweigh the costs, according to Interviewee 1. In contrast, Interviewee 3 suggests that satisfaction with provided packages depends on the person's length of stay in Korea and familiarity with offered attractions.

Interviewee 1: All the stuff that you get in exchange for four Instagram posts is just... [laugh] Weight it on the balance. You are coming out really well out of this equation.

Interviewee 3: I do not want to say, 'all of them were good' or 'all of them were bad'. In general, like most of the trips were very interesting. (...) If you are in Korea for the first or second year, I think all of them are perfect. (...) It is great if you do not have to think about anything. You do not have to book anything. You

⁷ According to interviewees, each program has a pre-agreed set number of social media posts that they request from participants. Some organisers even list those on their recruitment announcements (Interesting Korea, 2023-a; Interesting Korea, 2024).

are well fed. You are provided [with] entertainment. You are provided [with] a place to sleep. All you do is go, take pictures and smile at the camera. So, I think, if you are quite new to Korea, it would be the best experience ever for you. If you have been living here for a while, it is hit or miss. Some are really fun, and some are like, 'I have been here already'.

Overall, while all interviewees identified several elements that could be improved in *Supporter Programs*, which was linked with the intangible costs they had to bear for their participation, everyone agreed that their experiences were largely positive, and the number of benefits outweighed the costs. This was also proved by Interviewee 3's voluntary participation in an activity for the Sejong Center for the Performing Arts' *Supporter Program*⁸ to show appreciation for the organisers despite already fulfilling all of the compulsory missions for that initiative beforehand. The visit to the pop-up store was an additional mission that Interviewee 3 did not receive additional benefits for. However, she still decided to fulfil it due to her satisfaction with the program. The overall satisfaction of all interviewees with the *Supporter Programs* led to the repeated involvement of three out of four participants (interviewees 2, 3 and 4) and three out of four participants' willingness to participate again in the future (interviewees 1, 2 and 3). Interviewee 4, who participated in many *Supporter Programs*, expressed that he is no longer interested in applying. However, he would still strongly recommend them to others, just like all the remaining interviewees. This indicates that SMIs experienced the feeling of reciprocity in the exchange, which led, in most cases, to the creation of lasting commitment expressed through repeated participation, willingness to apply again, and universal eagerness to recommend the *Supporter Programs* to others.

5.2 How does participating in *Supporter programs* impact SMIs' perception of Korea?

Interviewees mainly mentioned the country name, its ministries or specific cities when speaking positively about the initiatives. In contrast, agencies are mentioned both in negative and positive contexts and are seen mostly as intermediaries in the exchange. All participants knew that the programs are sponsored and initiated by governmental bodies and that agencies are merely implementing them. Considering that all SMIs highly praise the idea and existence of *Supporter Programs*, but the implementation is a key reason for their complaints, it becomes clear that the positive associations created during their participation in programs are

⁸ This activity was described in section 4.2.2.

primarily associated with the specific governmental bodies that sponsor those initiatives or more broadly Korea, while negative with agencies. According to the *comparison level* concept from the Social Exchange Theory, positive past exchanges lead to a formation of expectations of repeated good experiences in the future. The interview data shows that SMIs choose to commit and repeatedly participate in different kinds of *Supporter Programs* because they have primarily positive past experiences that they associate with Korea and expect future exchanges to also benefit them. Interviewees have discussed this several ways throughout the interviews.

Interviewee 4: The thing is, how interesting the program is, is actually not really dependent on the government body that organises it, but the agency that's been selected. Because they don't run it directly.

Interviewee 2: The government itself, I would say, doesn't run these programs. I'm not sure if they even can run [them]. So, they employ agencies that should run [them]. (...) I do believe that some of their [agencies'] organisation is really good. Some of their organisation is ridiculous.

Interviewee 2: It's actually rare for the government to invest in stuff like that. So, I was like, (..) 'damn, be grateful you even have it'.

Social Exchange Theory, adopted as a theoretical framework for this study, helps explain the reasons for the strength of SMIs' commitment to participating in *Supporter Programs*. According to Social Exchange Theory, individuals are rational actors who seek to maximise rewards and minimise the costs of any interactions. This means individuals will engage in actions they perceive as beneficial to themselves and avoid actions they perceive as detrimental. A relationship is established once the mutually beneficial exchange becomes regular and once trust is developed between both parties of the exchange. This is the case for *Supporter Programs*. SMIs identified participation in them as beneficial; hence, they are willing to repeatedly apply to various *Supporter Programs* in Korea. According to Social Exchange Theory, the key principle of the exchange and relationship is reciprocity. When people receive something beneficial, they are expected to reciprocate in kind. A voluntary reciprocation without the threat of coercion helps develop trust between both parties participating in the exchange. In the case of *Supporter Programs*, the trust between the organiser and recruited SMIs is important to make the relationship viable. That is because participants are often taken on free trips or receive other benefits first, and the organiser has to trust that the social media content will be created according to the agreement, which is not legally enforceable. Similarly, with the programs that give monetary reimbursement to

participants only after they fulfil missions of their own accord, foreigners have to trust organisers that the reimbursement will be made. Therefore, the principles of reciprocity and trust help maintain balance and fairness in the relationship, enabling the relationship to endure and last.

Additionally, according to Social Exchange Theory, the benefits of participating in the exchange must outweigh the costs for both parties to make it worthwhile (Kim & Kim, 2021, p. 224). If one party perceives the relationship as unbalanced or unfair, they are likely to disengage, as in the cases described by Jin and Abidin discussed in Chapter 2 (2022). While one interviewee decided to stop applying for the *Supporter Programs*, he did so after attending multiple programs. He is still speaking mainly positively about them, suggesting a lack of grievances or significant dissatisfaction. Instead, the repetitiveness of the experience seems to be a deciding factor for withdrawing in his case. In general, interviews suggest a trend of satisfaction with the exchange, which leads to relationship development, as proved by repeated participation in *Supporter Programs* and participants' willingness to promote them. How does the development of relationships between SMIs and Korea support that country's public diplomacy strategy? Organisers could always recruit someone new for their programs without worrying about creating a lasting relationship. However, according to Social Exchange Theory, when one party consistently provides valuable resources to the other part in their exchanges, they may accumulate social capital, leading to increased influence and status (Blau, 1964, p. 269; Homans, 1958, p. 605-605). Consequently, social exchanges can generate social status and soft power. In this case, widely understood *Korea* in the form of local governments, ministries and other governmental institutions, regularly provides valuable benefits to foreign SMIs through *Supporter Programs*, positively affecting participants' perceptions of Korea (further discussed in the following section) and encouraging them to promote Korea on social media favourably. That leads to a positive publicity for Korea, feeding into Korea's public diplomacy strategy. Therefore, it is beneficial for Korea to focus on building a long-term relationship with *Supporter Programs* participants.

5.2.1 Comparison Level & Enhanced Perception of Korea

Interviews with foreign SMIs who participated in *Supporter Programs* exposed that this type of exchange affects Korea's reputation in several ways. Firstly, it enhances Korea's global image by offering foreigners unique opportunities they may not readily find and have never

experienced in other countries. Three out of four interviewees used comparisons with other countries to explain and justify their satisfaction with the *Supporter Programs*.

Interviewee 1: I could not imagine the skim like that working in Czech Republic. I cannot imagine my hometown, which is roughly the same size, doing something similar. That gives a little bit of appreciation for the tech savviness and maybe foresight in a way.

Interviewee 2: I mean, does it even exist in other countries? (...) It is so rare. It probably exists, but it is so rare. It is like you have a program for everything here, sponsored by the government. I am from Russia. I mean, like, everything that is sponsored by government is suspicious.

Interviewee 4: Most of the people that participate are students. I do not believe any country provides such lavish [laugh] experiences for the students, right?

According to Social Exchange Theory, individuals have a subjective comparison level based on their past experiences, which impacts their future expectations and helps shape their opinions. This comparison level helps them decide if the rewards of a new relationship meet their standards. Considering that the three interviewed foreigners deemed the existence of governmental *Supporter Programs* for foreigners in Korea as something out of the norm, it indicates that they did not have pre-existing experiences with similar programs abroad, which affects their subjective comparison level. When the only comparison level is the lack of similar past experiences, the mere existence of governmental programs offering so many benefits for foreigners is seen by SMIs as positive, as indicated by the abovementioned quotes. Those comparisons can help explain an overall positive evaluation of the *Supporter Programs* despite the considerable costs mentioned by each interviewee. Interviewees suggest that Korea stands out on a global scale positively, favourably affecting foreigners' overall evaluation of the country. However, when asked directly about the impact of participating in *Supporter Programs* on their perception of Korea, the answers given by interviewees leaned toward the more positive side but were not exactly conclusive. Interviewee 1 expressed appreciation for Tongyeong - the specific city she visited as a part of the *Supporter program*, which is mentioned in the quote at the beginning of this section but did not mention Korea as a whole. Interviewees 2, 3 and 4 agreed that their understanding of Korea is better because of participation in *Supporter Programs*, but most said that their perception of Korea as a whole had not changed.

Interviewee 2: Well, I do not think it has changed a lot. I think it just broadened my understanding of Korea.

Interviewee 3: I would not say... I feel like I learned a lot about festivals happening [here] and about how much there is more outside of Seoul. But speaking about culture or activities, I think it did not change it that much.

Interviewee 4: No... I mean it improved that... (...) I managed to see places that would be hard for me to go and or to find. I think it is a good initiative, but they need to do more.

Notably, the answers indicate that participation in *Supporter Programs* helps foreign SMIs increase their understanding of Korea's culture and their engagement in cultural activities. This is conclusive with the sentiments mentioned by interviewees 2, 3 and 4 throughout the interviews. They all shared that they have been able to visit and experience many new places and activities due to the programs and assigned missions. Those testimonies indicate that *Supporter Programs* helped foreigners learn more about Korea's culture and improved their evaluation of the country, especially when compared with other states, both of which are essential goals of Korea's public diplomacy strategy.

5.2.2 Enhanced experience of living in Korea

During the inductive analysis of the interviews, it became apparent that participation in *Supporter Programs* impacted participating SMIs' lives in Korea even beyond their time attending those initiatives. Although *Supporter Programs* seem like an apparent attempt by the government to increase Korea's visibility on social media, they also have a positive side effect of enhancing the experiences of foreigners living in Korea. While it is unclear if this is intentional, three of the interviewed foreign SMIs expressed that due to participation in the *Supporter Programs*, they have been able to build a community by making friends and consequently better acclimatise in the country.

Interviewee 3: So, it really helps to just connect with the community and connect with people who do similar things as you do. (...) That way you find people who like similar things as you do, and also people who have similar views of Korea. Because really, your life here depends on what kind of people you meet, and what kind of community you are living in. (...) Since everyone in my community is like, 'I am doing this program', 'I am going to this festival', 'I am going to this place to try it', 'I am seeing this show', you kind of want to do this as well.

A similar perspective was also shared and earlier quoted from Interviewee 2. Since both interviewees had moved to the country alone and had few connections, the *Supporter Programs* became a way for them to build a community and increase the amount of socialising. According to researchers, building a community is vital for acclimatising to a new country and overall life satisfaction while living abroad (Novara et al., 2023; Hombrados-

Mendieta et al., 2019). *Supporter Programs* facilitate that by connecting foreigners living in Korea and enabling them to increase their social capital through networking and community building. Since there are also programs that recruit both Koreans and foreigners, this is also an opportunity to integrate into society by making local friends. An example of such a program is *KOREAZ*, which recruits an equal number of foreigners and Koreans (MOFA, 2024).

Another significant way in which *Supporter Programs* affect participating foreigners' lives is by encouraging and inspiring them to explore, try new things, and attend local festivals and celebrations. As discussed in section 1.1, travel, exploration, and entertainment are some of the main reasons why foreigners choose to participate in *Supporter Programs*. Interviewees 2 and 4 expressed that those activities are a way to fill in their free time and motivate them to explore.

Interviewee 4: I was really impressed by the country. You do not have a big circle when you move. I did not come here for K-pop or K-drama, so I did not have a circle or interest to keep my free time busy. It is usually people that come for K-pop; they are going to take classes for that, or K-drama. And for me, I had to find what to do in my free time, so I decided that I can travel.

Interviewee 2: These programs support... [They] give me ideas on where to go and what to do. They motivate me, because without them, I will probably [say]: 'Maybe next week', or 'Maybe that week', or just 'Let's do it in my area', or something like that. But these are specific missions, so it is, like, we have to do it. (...) So, it is just inspirational stuff for me. (...) Yes, it is a reason to discover something new.

Researchers suggest that travelling and participating in leisure and social activities significantly contribute to subjective life satisfaction and happiness (Kim et al., 2024, p. 10; Nawijn et al., 2011, p. 40). All four interviewed SMIs indicated that their social media content mainly concerns travelling. They expressed interest in that aspect of *Supporter Programs* and have primarily positive experiences with programs and life in Korea. All of those factors suggest a correlation between their ability to travel extensively and participate in various activities organised by *Supporter Programs*, such as leisure activities, and their overall satisfaction with their lives in Korea.

5.3 Implications for Korea's Public Diplomacy Strategy

Findings presented in sections 5.1 and 5.2 show that foreigners have a largely positive experience of participating in *Supporter Programs* in Korea, which affects their general opinion about Korea and understanding of the local culture to some degree. Additionally,

participation in those programs positively impacted foreigners' experience of living in South Korea, mainly due to socio-cultural reasons. While those findings are based on a small sample of foreigners and cannot be generalised, they help explain the benefits of *Supporter Programs* for Korea's public diplomacy. Based on the findings from sections 5.1 and 5.2, this section explores what role *Supporter Programs* play in Korea's public Diplomacy strategy.

5.3.1 Social Media

The primary condition of participating in governmental *Supporter Programs* is the creation of social media content. Depending on the activity type and length, the required content amount might differ. However, in general, foreigners are required to post at least a few social media contents in the form of a reel, post, story, video, or other content, depending on the social media platform and the organiser. If we take an example of the trip to Tongyeong that Interviewee 1 participated in, where within a two-day trip, 30 foreigners had to create four Instagram posts each, a total of 120 social media posts were created about that small city within less than 48 hours. While the numbers may seem low, the content created was mostly likely very positive, as indicated by interviewed influencers, showed the city's best sites as curated by the trip organisers, and included several hashtags related to the city, helping boost the popularity of the posts. This is significant publicity for the city, which has been struggling with a constantly decreasing number of visitors (Park, 2019). And this is just one example of many. As Interviewee 4 put it, there are 'thousands [of similar programs promoted] a day, because every single city has their own. Everybody has it.' Consequently, the prevalence of these programs leads to a large quantity of social media content being created daily about Korea. According to information from all interviewees, *Supporter Programs* give participants a high level of freedom when it comes to the content they post. However, they must follow some specific guidelines, such as posting on a specific day, mentioning visited locations, or following a specifically assigned theme. Even if the organisers do not impose the angle of social media content that has to be shared by participants, they can curate topics by assigning thematical missions or showing specifically selected sights during a tour. Therefore, they can impact what will be exposed on social media without imposing it directly on creators. This approach helps the participants stay true to their usual style of posts and makes the content seem genuine to their followers. This is an obvious benefit to Korea's public diplomacy, as it leads to increased positive publicity, which is curated by the governmental bodies but reaches the foreign public globally in an organic-like way. Content is convincing because SMIs largely create the posts subtly, and many posts do not acknowledge sponsorship or mention

that their participation is a part of a sponsored trip. Although this might not be ethical, it makes the reviews and recommendations look convincing and authentic. While all interviewees mentioned that they had much creative freedom and were never told to only post about the positive aspects of participating in *Supporter Programs*, most participants suggested they voluntarily self-censored themselves from posting about the negative sides of the trips and activities.

Interviewee 1: We had those welcome presentations. There was a representative from the town who was like: ‘Thank you that you have come to promote this city’. (...) When you get this sort of introduction, and when you reflect on how much this has probably cost the town, you do want to promote them in a good way, to sort of repay, even though it’s not money.

Interviewee 2: As the supporter you... It is not like you can just go and say: ‘Everything is crap there’. You technically can... So, it is like... Well... [pause]. I have not seen people [participants] doing this. (...) We do not specifically sign stuff like ‘I swear to tell only positive stuff about Korea’. You probably will not be reselected next year or something like that or chosen for the ‘best content’ if you just pour shit into the topic or something like that. (...) [But] you talk about it how you want to talk about it. So, yeah. I do feel there is a freedom of creative content.

Interviewee 3: If I do not like an activity, I would prefer not to post about it and post about something different. Usually if you go on a trip, they would bring you to four or five places, but you have to post only two things. So, you can pick and choose. (...) I would tell my opinion honestly, but I would package it as nicely as possible. (...) You kind of feel guilty to say something bad.

This leads to a large quantity of positive social media content about Korea being created due to *Supporter Programs*, which, as interviews suggest, are mostly honest about the good parts but omit the negative aspects. Interviewee 2, who has participated in 6 such initiatives so far, mentioned that she has never seen participants posting negative stuff about *the Supporter Programs* she participated in. This is consistent with answers from the other interviewed SMIs and with what I have observed while researching SMIs and their posts on Instagram for the purpose of this research. Interestingly, all interviewees agreed that they practice this restraint not only when posting for *Supporter Programs* but also beyond them when regularly posting on their social media channels.

Interviewee 3: I restrain from controversial topics or just sitting in front of the camera and complaining. Of course, if something really bad happens, I will talk about it, maybe in my stories. But the majority of my content would be travelling. (...) Usually, I try to be as informative as possible, and give historical background, cultural background, why this place is here, what it was before, why it was made,

and why it is this way. (...) I just try to give as much information in an easy way as possible.

Interviewee 4: To be honest, I try to be honest. But you are biased. You are always biased, right? And luckily, I am happy with Korea so far. So, I am like positively biased towards Korea. And most of the creators who are not bitter from the life here, we kind of tend to idealise the country. And of course, we only show the best, right? We want to show the most beautiful places. I am not going to shoot like a rundown area or a very dirty street.

This shows that the *Supporter Programs* are an effective way to generate a lot of positive social media content about Korea in a short time. In itself, this approach is not a sustainable long-term solution because the number of posts generated depends on the length of the *Supporter Programs* and, ultimately, the budget each governmental body has to spend on providing trips or activities for foreigners. However, as the interviews show, those programs can also have a long-term effect. Two out of four interviewees said that their primary motivation to start posting regularly about Korea on social media was their participation in *Supporter Programs*.

Interviewee 2: Yes. So, before that [*Supporter Programs*], it was personal [social media account]. (...) Just for me, for my family, (...). So, I started to post about Korea, or even I started to post constantly only when I got engaged in those programs. So, this was a trigger. Sort of a trigger. (...) For those programs, there is a minimum following (...) that you have to have. I think it is, like, 500 [followers].

Interviewee 3: One of the first moments when I started posting publicly was a free sponsored trip. (...) And from then I was like: ‘Oh, travelling around the country is kind of cool. I do not have to stay on my campus only’. And I think it kind of sparked my interest and I started posting more.

Supporter Programs inspired the two SMIs to regularly post content about Korea on social media. Since then, the two interviewees have posted regularly and grown to have 9,000+ and 13,000+ followers, respectively, solely by posting about Korea regularly. As of December 2024, Interviewee 2 made 450+, and Interviewee 3 made 1,400+ social media posts on their main Instagram accounts, and this does not even include Instagram Stories that cannot be counted but are extensively utilised by both creators. This shows that by influencing two SMIs to post about Korea regularly on social media, *Supporter Programs* indirectly inspired the creation of nearly 2,000 social media posts about Korea, which were cumulatively exposed to at least 22,000+ people who follow their accounts and consume their content. While *Supporters Programs* cannot be credited fully for this, they inspired those two SMIs to grow their accounts. This is just an example of two cases which comprise half of this study's interviewees. While none of the findings of this study can be generalised due to a small

sample, it shows that *Supporter Programs* not only lead to a one-time spike in the number of posts about Korea but also, in some cases, can engage foreigners to become SMIs specialised in posting about Korea long-term. Consequently, in the context of social media *Supporter Programs* contribute to Korea's public diplomacy strategy by:

- Increasing the amount of positive publicity about Korea on social media.
- Giving governmental bodies the ability to curate themes of social media posts to fit the state's public diplomacy goals.
- Enabling the content about Korea to reach a diverse audience by recruiting foreigners from around the world to post about the country on their own public social media channels.
- Inspiring foreigners to actively share information about Korea on social media even beyond participation in *Supporter Programs*.

5.3.2 *Supporter Programs* as embodiment of Korea's public diplomacy strategy

Supporter Programs, besides the *KOREAZ* initiative, are not directly mentioned as a part of Korea's public diplomacy strategy. However, as it became apparent through the analysis of *Supporter Programs* and interviews with foreigners participating in those initiatives, they effectively incorporate several public diplomacy goals into one initiative. Firstly, as discussed in the previous section, *Supporter Programs* focus on using social media to disseminate information about Korea, which is the third goal listed in Korea's public diplomacy Master Plan (MOFA, 2023). The *information* here can mean anything from facts about Korea's policies to stories about Korea's culture and tourist sites. Beyond that, several other aspects of *Supporter Programs* correspond with Korea's current public diplomacy strategy. Firstly, they align with goals surrounding foreigners' understanding and support for Korea, including the ambition to foster an accurate and nuanced understanding of Korea abroad and to cultivate support for the country through dynamic and interactive cultural diplomacy that leverages the popularity of K-Culture. Those goals are listed in the current public diplomacy Master Plan and are achieved through *Supporters Programs* by cascading information through foreign SMIs. Participants shared in interviews that their understanding of Korea and its culture has improved by participating in activities such as cultural events, sightseeing, festivals, visiting historical sites, etc., organized by *Supporter Programs*. Foreigners who were able to experience those activities are then tasked with posting about their experiences, visited places or specific events on their social media and disseminating the information to the wider public

worldwide. The knowledge SMIs share is based on the experiences and missions curated by organizers; hence, their social media posts include selective information focused on features of Korea that are most appealing to foreigners. This is true for programs such as *TONIGHT TongYeong!* a two-day tour during which SMIs are taken to specific places selected by the city and are required to post about them or their experiences from visiting those sites (Interesting Korea, 2023). Other programs, such as Global Seoul Mate, assign less specific missions to participants, such as ‘introducing unique vibes of cafes in Seoul’ (according to interviewee 2). Those kinds of missions enable the state to handpick themes that align with current trends, each region’s strengths and promotional goals. In both types of programs, participants can decide about the overall direction of their posts within the assigned themes. Interviewee 3 shared that the freedom to post about any aspect of the trip or assigned activity helps SMIs choose the parts of the trip or activity that are true to their regular content, making their posts about the *Supporter Programs* more authentic. This matters because, as Abidin argues, the believability and authenticity of SMIs are the key reasons why they are able to influence their online audiences and their audiences’ choices (Abidin, 2017, p. 161). By recruiting foreigners to share their unique take on aspects of Korean culture selected by the organizers, the state can ensure the dissemination of nuanced and specific information through voices that are more relatable to foreign audiences than the official governmental social media channels. This also plays into other objectives listed in the Master Plan, including the goal for local governments to increase their engagement in exchange programs with foreign communities and to expand the support for local organizations that promote cultural exchange and understanding.

Article 3 (2) of Korea’s Public Diplomacy Act states that ‘public diplomacy policy shall focus on the promotion of sustainable and friendly cooperation for amicable relations with the international community’. (Public Diplomacy Act, 2016). MOFA’s official webpage states that a critical task of Korea’s public diplomacy strategy is to ‘build support for Korea through interactive cultural diplomacy’ (MOFA, no date). Those two statements highlight the progression of Korea’s perception of public diplomacy, from it being considered a one-way communication to a new approach that considers cooperation and direct engagement with foreign publics as a more desirable model. This new approach is aligned with Social Exchange Theory, which suggests that reciprocity in exchange leads to the formation of a relationship, which, if proven satisfying, can, in turn, lead to increased influence and status. This strategy is implemented in *Supporter Programs*, which actively engage foreigners

residing in Korea to be both recipients and creators of the state's public diplomacy, embodying the principle of cooperation. As discussed in sections 5.1 and 5.2, largely positive experiences of participating in *Supporter Programs* lead to the creation of lasting and mostly positive relationships between them and the state. As a result, most SMIs reciprocate through a sustained commitment to *Supporter Programs* and, as in the case of Interviewees 2 and 3, by posting about Korea on social media, even beyond those activities. This commitment by SMIs is a form of 'support for Korea' in response to 'interactive cultural diplomacy' (in the form of *Supporter Programs*), as planned by MOFA. It can also be considered an equivalent of the 'sustainable and friendly cooperation' that Korea's Public Diplomacy Act calls for. Consequently, foreign SMIs who participate in *Supporter Programs* are no longer only the target audience of public diplomacy but also participate in its creation, which is a goal codified in Article 4 (4) of Public Diplomacy Act.

Lastly, *Supporter Programs* indirectly support Korea's public diplomacy goals surrounding foreigners' social and cultural integration in Korea. The 2nd Master Plan suggests that as a part of public diplomacy, the state should support the integration of foreign residents into Korean society by facilitating cultural exchange and providing them with the resources they need to thrive in Korea. This also includes helping foreign residents understand the Korean language, culture, and laws, which will ultimately lead to creating a network of individuals who have a greater understanding of Korea. As discussed in section 5.2, participation in *Supporter Programs* positively impacts foreigners' experience of living in Korea and their acclimatization process by providing opportunities to socialize, form communities of friends, better understand the local culture, and act as a source of entertainment and opportunities for leisure. Considering that all three interviewees who repeatedly participated in *Supporter Programs* confessed to having a largely positive experience of living in Korea and at the same time considered those initiatives as an important source of making friends, entertainment and travel opportunities, there is a link between their experience of living in Korea and participation in *Supporter Programs*. Consequently, all factors, including, *Supporter Programs* contribute to Korea's public diplomacy strategy, as confirmed by interviews and web-based research, by:

- Fostering a deeper appreciation of Korea internationally by using interactive cultural diplomacy to showcase and capitalize on the global influence of K-Culture.
- Building positive relationships with foreigners living in Korea.

- Improving the living experience for foreigners in Korea to support their social and cultural integration.

6 Conclusion

Results presented in the preceding chapter showcase that *Supporter Programs* are a successful initiative that, together with serving Korea's public diplomacy goals, also positively impacts participating foreigners' experiences of living in Korea. While those findings are based on a limited sample and cannot be generalised, they showcase a significant chance that governments have to capitalise on the rise of social media through similar initiatives.

Analysed in this study, *Supporter Programs* embody all core goals of Korea's public diplomacy, including the elevation of Korea's international image and reputation, fostering a supportive global environment for Korea by directly communicating with foreign publics, building trust and rapport with foreign nationals to bolster Korea's influence worldwide and utilising digital innovations and social media to widen the reach of Korea's public diplomacy. By incorporating many of the goals in one initiative, *Supporter Programs* are a novel and creative way of effectively engaging with foreign publics and increasing country's soft power that governments can replicate globally. However, to ensure that *Supporter Programs* serve their purpose, the government must pay close attention to their implementation and monitor the participant's satisfaction rate. *Supporter Programs* with rushed schedules that interfere excessively with participants' social media content creation leave participants frustrated, negatively affecting the quality of social media posts they produce and their likelihood of participating in the same program again. That can significantly reduce the effectiveness of this strategy. Additionally, governments have to select the right target audience for those programs to maximise their impact. All participants interviewed in this study had an interest in Korean culture or prior positive experiences of living in Korea, with two interviewees openly saying they were positively biased toward the country. People who already have those links to the country will likely be satisfied with items such as trips around Korea, access to concerts and festivals, and a chance to learn more about Korean culture. The fact that this kind of k-enthusiasts are a target audience of *Supporter Programs* can help further explain why those initiatives are popular and repeatedly joined by foreign SMIs in Korea.

Beyond acting as a platform for two-way communication with foreign publics, *Supporter Programs* are also an example of how governments can build a long-term relationship with them in a two-dimensional way. Firstly, by directly influencing foreign SMIs and the type of content they post, and secondly, by indirectly influencing their followers through SMIs' content. By cascading the message through SMIs, governments can amplify the reach and

capitalise on those influencers' reputations accumulated by their social status. This goes both ways, as SMIs can also, in turn, capitalise on the popularity of Korea and access to various cultural sites, concerts or festivals to make their social media accounts more popular and gain followers. Additionally, as Interviewee 2 indicated, the *Supporter Programs* can boost SMIs' self-evaluation or even help them gain prestige through unofficially or officially assigned titles such as *ambassadors*.

Another interpretation of foreign SMIs' satisfaction with *Supporter Programs* could be the universal appeal of *free stuff*. All interviewees mentioned that free trips and activities motivate them to participate in *Supporter Programs*, with three people emphasising that as the main reason to join those initiatives. Even though the trips or concerts are not exactly free for participants, as they have to create social media content and at times complete other duties in exchange for all that, the intangible costs are perceived by interviewed foreign SMIs as a small price to pay in exchange for tangible benefits that they otherwise would have to pay for. All of those *free* experiences and gifts are desirable for various reasons. For some, it feels like a bargain not having to physically pay for things they would typically have to spend money on. For others, it is a way to experience things that are usually unreachable or unaffordable for them. Additionally, as Interviewee 4 put it, 'who does not want a free trip, right?' The concept of *free stuff* works in favour of *Supporter Programs* and positively affects how participants evaluate the benefits they get because, as Shampanier et al. argue, when an item is free, its perceived value increases because there is no associated cost or risk (2007, p. 750). The lack of tangible risks makes the free options very tempting for SMIs and makes *Supporter Programs* appear more attractive.

Social Exchange Theory was used in this study to help explain why foreign SMIs choose to participate, in most cases repeatedly, in *Supporter Programs*. The core identified reason is the cost-benefit analysis that interviewees consider favourable to them. The second cause was central to the Social Exchange Theory principle of reciprocity, which can be interpreted in two ways in the context of this exchange between foreign SMIs and governmental bodies. On the one hand, interviewees felt like the organisers were reciprocating by rewarding participants well for their efforts. This made participants willing to repeatedly enter the exchange and develop a lasting relationship with governmental bodies organising the initiatives. On the other hand, receiving things such as trips or access to concerts or other activities seemingly for free triggered a sense of obligation to return the favour among participants, who all acknowledged that they were voluntarily restricting themselves to post

only positive content on social media about the activities or visited sites as a part of *Supporter Programs*. The positive posting by all participants has a few sides to it. Firstly, foreigners might genuinely enjoy the activities, hence wanting to show it in a good light. Secondly, they might feel obligated to pay back for free stuff in the form of good social media posts, as per the concept of reciprocity. Alternatively, they may want to avoid potential negative consequences of negative posts, such as not being selected as the best creator or not being selected for future editions of the program. All three options play a role, according to interviewees. That interplay of all three elements makes participants want to post positive content while also engaging them to join the initiatives repeatedly. As a consequence of the overall positive experiences, the concept of reciprocity and a large number of benefits, foreign SMIs choose to participate repeatedly in *Supporter Programs*, even if they had some negative experiences along the way, which in turn contributes to Korea's increased social capital, and soft power. Even if some interviewees chose not to join some specific initiatives again after having a bad experience, they were still willing to join others, showing the strength of the overall concept of *Supporter Programs*.

One of the most surprising findings of this study is the positive long-term impact of *Supporter Programs* on interviewed foreigner's lives in Korea. One of the benefits of participating in *Supporter Programs* is the chance to stay entertained, socialise and experience new things and sites. This is likely to be strongly linked with the generally positive experiences of interviewed foreigners with their lives in Korea. However, perhaps a more important finding is the opportunity that *Supporter Programs* give to network and get to know new people. Two of the interviewed foreign SMIs expressed that their community and circle of friends is formed almost exclusively out of people they met while participating in the *Supporter Program*, which is an important element that help those initiatives have a long-lasting effect. This can serve two purposes. Firstly, it helps facilitate easier acclimatisation of participating foreigners in the country by enabling them to build up their networks, which is crucial for learning the local know-how, developing a sense of belonging and building a support system. This is positive both for the foreigner, who is likely to have a more positive experience on emigration, and for the country because it helps integrate foreigners into the local community. Secondly, when, as in the case of Interviewees 2 and 3, foreigners' network is built almost exclusively out of regular *Supporter Programs* participants, it can drive continuous participation. Interviewer 2 acknowledged that *Supporter Programs* and social media are what she and most of her friends have in common, so it motivates her to continue

participating in *Supporter Programs* to maintain those relationships. It also makes her post regularly about Korea on social media, which is precisely the goal of Korea's public diplomacy. This example shows that people-centred public diplomacy strategies that focus on providing value to participants, such as *Supporter Programs*, can be a very effective way of ensuring a long-term impact of initiatives. This kind of approach can amplify the positive effects for the country in the long run, besides the short-term gains they see in the form of a social media presence boost.

Despite providing robust and conclusive findings, this study had several limitations. Firstly, the findings are based on a small sample of foreign SMIs interviewed for this research. This is a result of many factors, including time constraints and a challenge in finding suitable participants willing to participate in the study. Additionally, as this was my first time conducting an ethnographic study with qualitative interviews, it was challenging to navigate the robustness of this research method within the short time I spent on exchange in Korea. However, I have learned many lessons along the way that I will be able to apply in my future studies. Secondly, my language limitations enabled me to conduct this research only in English and Korean, which meant that my findings excluded data and information about *Supporter Programs* dedicated to Japanese and Chinese speakers, who make up a significant number of foreign tourists and residents of Korea. Consequently, this research analysed only opportunities advertised to English speakers, limiting the extensiveness of findings.

With very little research available on the topic of *Supporter Programs* and collaboration between governments and foreign SMIs, there are still many opportunities for further research on this topic. Foremost, while this research focused on *Supporter Programs* offered on the territory of Korea for foreign SMIs who reside in the country, there are plenty of similar initiatives that, to my best knowledge, are yet to be studied by academic scholars. For example, *Supporter Programs* organised by Korean embassies in countries such as India, Serbia or Indonesia, or programs such as 'Honorary Reporter' that recruit thousands of online foreign supporters worldwide to write about Korea for the Korea.net website. All of those are fascinating initiatives to research. Another interesting angle to *Supporter Programs* is to analyse them through the lens of organisers. While this research focused mainly on participants of *Supporter Programs*, future studies could pursue interviews with representatives from governmental bodies or agencies sponsoring those initiatives. This could help us better understand the benefits the country gains from such programs and their main objectives, which is something this study could not capture. Finally, while this study focuses

solely on Korea, a deep dive into other countries' similar initiatives, if those exist, could be a significant contribution to the disciplines of public diplomacy and social media studies. Those are only a few of many opportunities for research in this still primarily unexplored but fascinating and rapidly expanding field.

To summarise, *Supporter Programs* are a unique take on conducting public diplomacy in a collaborative way with foreign audiences, which makes Korea stand out in the global arena. *Supporter Programs* capitalise on the simultaneous rapid rise of social media and Hallyu, incorporating both elements into one initiative that helped accelerate the amount of content about Korea on the biggest social media platforms and simultaneously fuel foreigners' understanding of Korea. This research shows that participants of those initiatives are largely satisfied with their experiences and consider *Supporter Programs* a beneficial exchange that provides them instant gratification and long-term benefits. At the same time, the country is gaining by increasing the amount of curated and positive social media publicity, shaping participating foreigners to be allies and ambassadors of the country by spreading information about Korea and, in the process, influencing others to visit Korea. All of that showcases that effectively implemented public diplomacy is one that appeals to the right audience, in this case, k-enthusiasts, offers a range of benefits to keep people interested and make them want to reciprocate, and incorporates several public diplomacy goals to help maximise the impact. In this context, *Supporter Programs* might be a blueprint for other countries to follow.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview questions

1. When and what sparked your interest in South Korea?
2. When and why did you move to South Korea, and how long have you been living here?
3. How has your experience of living in South Korea has been so far?
4. When did you first start posting about South Korea on social media?
5. What were your motivations when you started making posts about South Korea on social media, and what are your motivations to post about it now?
6. What kind of content about or referring to South Korea do you usually post on your social media platforms? Has it changed over time?
7. How do you usually talk about or portray Korea in the content you create?
8. What kind of content is the most popular among your followers?
9. How many Supporter Programs have you participated in?
10. Can you please list the initiatives that you participated in?
11. How was your experience of participating in those initiatives?
12. What factors motivated you to participate in those initiatives?
13. Were you satisfied with what was provided for you while participating in those initiatives?
14. Was there anything you were not satisfied with while participating in those initiatives?
15. Did you receive any guidelines on how much or what you have to post on social media about participation in this initiative?
16. Did you feel like you had the freedom to post your true thoughts about participation in the initiatives or, more broadly, about Korea, whether they were positive or negative while participating in those initiatives?
17. Did your experiences of participating in the government initiatives influence your perceptions of Korea?
18. Are you planning to participate in more such programs/campaigns in the future?
19. Would you recommend others to participate in those initiatives?

Appendix 2: Supporter Programs Details

The table is divided into three parts to comply with the University of Turku accessibility standards. All information provided is

Part 1 of the table:

Scale	Governmental Body in charge	Supporter Program Name	Private agency running the program	Editions identifies (per year)	Mission Statement / Call for Applicants
NATION-WIDE	KTO	Adventure Korea	-	2023, 2024	'Korea Tourism Organization (KTO) is recruiting Adventure Korea Supporters for 2024, who will travel all around Korea and share their adventures and stories with the world on social media.'
		WOW Korea	-	2023, 2024	'Korea Tourism Organization are recruiting people from Middle East and South-East Asia living in Korea to participate in a program called 'Wow Korea Supporters' – creating media content on the internet after travel and experiencing Korean culture. We are looking for participants who are not just interested in travelling, but also want to experience and communicate with culture of Korea and want to tell it to the worlds through SNS.'
		KTO SNS Supporters	Gangnam Global Village Center	2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021	'We are recruiting KTO SNS supporters who love travel and want to introduce various aspects of Korea to the world!'
	MOFA	Koreaz	-	2024	'The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) is now accepting applications for the 2024 <KOREAZ Supporters> program, which aims to promote the diverse charms of Korea to the world.'

		Korea Allimi (Unboxing Korea)	-	2022, 2023	'As part of UNBOXING KOREA, a public diplomacy program that engages with foreign residents in Korea, the Public Diplomacy Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea (MOFA) is pleased to be recruiting the 4th Korea Allimi, who introduces diverse and comprehensive information about Korea to the world.'
LOCAL (Provinces, Cities)	KTO	Busan Marine Adventures	Interesting Korea	2024	'Interesting Korea is looking for 12 foreign digital creators who will have the opportunity to promote Busan's Vibrant Seas! Join our tour to capture Busan's marine landscape and unleash your creativity!'
		[Starry Night in Busan] Busan Night Trip Exploring Event	Interesting Korea	2022	'We are looking for 20 foreign digital creators to promote Busan's night tourism. Enjoy your night tour at beautiful Busan and share it with your followers and subscribers!'
	Gyeonggi Tourism Organization	- Oh! My Gyeonggi (O.M.G)	Interesting Korea	2021, 2022, 2023, 2024	'Gyeonggi Tourism Organization is looking for "2024 Gyeonggi Tourism Foreign Supporters - Oh! My Gyeonggi (OMG)", foreign content creators who are to promote travel destinations of Gyeonggi province.'
	Gyeonggi-do	Gyeonggi Province Honorary Ambassador	-	2023, 2024	'Gyeonggi Province offers opportunities to participate in customized programs to foreign residents who want to engage as members of the global community.'
	Gangwon-do Tourism Organisation	Yeongwol Train Tour to the Full Moon	FundayKorea	2023	'We are setting off to discover the magic of the night sky on the Stargazing Train

					Journey to Yeongwol, known as one of the best places for night sky observation in Korea. Let's get closer to the full moon together!
	Jeollanam-do Tourism Organisation	2023 JEOLLANAM-DO GLOBAL SUPPORTERS	FundayKorea	2023	'Become a Jeonnam global supporter and share Jeonnam's beauty with the world.'
	Jeollanam-do	Jeonnam DMGY Trip Supporters	FundayKorea	2023	'Jeonnam DMGY stands for Damyang, Mokpo, Gurye and Yeosu. Choose a place you've dreamt of visiting and apply!'
	Seongju City	Real Korea, Authentic Seongju	Interesting Korea	2023	'We want YOU to promote Seongju as the most authentic city in Korea. That's right—we're giving you the chance to stay at a traditional Korean hanok house, and then explore hidden gems in Seongju and even see cherry blossoms in spring. So, pack your bags (&Cameras) and get ready for an adventure that will get away from the hustle and bustle of the city.'
		Tongyeong Workation Program	Interesting Korea	2023	'We are looking for digital nomads, content creators, and workers who wish to experience the workation in Tongyeong. Stay in Tongyeong for 3 days and experience and discover various charms from your perspective!'
	Tongyeong City	2023 투나잇 통영 글로벌 서포터즈 TONIGHT TongYeong! Global Supporters	Interesting Korea	2023	'Discover the Nighttime Charm of Tongyeong. The first 'City Specializing in Night Tourism' in Korea! We are inviting you to global supporters to promote night tourism in Tongyeong.'

	Daegu City & Andong City	Daegu & Andong Foodie Adventures	Interesting Korea	2023	'Are you a digital creator with a love for adventure and storytelling? Interesting Korea is recruiting content creators to discover Daegu & Andong, two captivating cities in Korea, filled with rich history and culture. Explore traditional markets, historical landmarks, and so much more that will leave you in awe!'
	Daegu Foundation for Culture & Arts (2024) / Daegu Tourism Bureau (2020)	2020 & 2024 Daegu & Gyeongbuk Global Tourism Supporters	Interesting Korea	2020, 2024	'Daegu Foundation for Culture & Arts is looking for "2024 Daegu & Gyeongbuk Global Tourism Supporters –, foreign content creators whose mission is to promote travel destinations of Daegu and Gyeongbuk area.'
	Busan Tourism Organization	Busan Tourism Global Supporters	-	2017, 2018	'We're looking for the "Global Supporters" who will travel Busan and share their travelogue to help others to travel Busan!'
	Seoul Metropolitan Government	Seoul Foreign Language SNS Supporters, Seoulites	-	2024	'Introduce the charming city of Seoul to the world from the perspective of Seoulites.'
	Seoul Metropolitan Government / Seoul Tourism Organisation	Global Seoul Mate	-	2012 - 2024 (12 editions)	'Global Seoul Mates are a delegation of foreigners who are living in Korea. Seoul Mates create and share content that shows off Seoul's charms to the world on Seoul's official tourism website and other social media platforms.'

Part 2 of the table:

Scale	Governmental body in charge	Supporter Program name	Objective promoted	Length (of	Social media (and other) content required from participants.
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				each edition)	
NATION-WIDE	KTO	Adventure Korea	Promotion of Korea's tourism	8 months	'Coverage of tourist attractions through field trips and mission activities provided by the KTO, Creation of various types of travel review content such as images, videos, and short-form videos, Support and participation in various promotions organized by the KTO, creating content about Korea that aligns with the interests of our supporters.'
		WOW Korea	Promotion of Korea's tourism and culture	8 months	'Join trips planned by KTO, create and upload image or video-based contents promoting visited attractions, festivals to personal SM account, production and uploading of any other content related to Korean tourism.'
		KTO SNS Supporters	Promotion of Korea's tourism	8 months	'Covering tourist destinations through trips and missions organized by KTO, Production of contents (videos, photos, etc.) about the trip experiences, participating in various promotional activities organized by KTO.'
	MOFA	Koreaz	Promotion of Korea's foreign policies and Korea as a Global Pivotal State.	8 months	'Create KOREAZ content for MOFA's social media channels, Support major MOFA events.'
		Korea Allimi (Unboxing Korea)	Promotion of Korea's foreign policies, systems, culture.	8 months	'Create, upload, and promote via personal social media platforms content on Korea's policies, systems, culture, etc., on a regular basis'
	LOCAL (Provinces, Cities)	KTO	Busan Marine Adventures	Promotion of tourism in Busan.	2 days

					media (Instagram, TikTok, etc): Post carousel of the tour spots (at least 3 pictures and details of the spots), Reels that is full of creativity and shows the beauty of the place. +Add Instagram Highlights for "Busan". YouTube– Last longer than 5 minutes.'
		[Starry Night in Busan] Busan Night Trip Exploring Event	Promotion of tourism in Busan.	2 days	'Create more than 5 contents (Instagram/Facebook posts, YouTube video or Blog article, Google/TripAdvisor Reviews). Must use compulsory hashtags'
	Gyeonggi Tourism Organization	- Oh! My Gyeonggi (O.M.G)	Promotion of tourism in Gyeonggi province.	8 months	'Field trips with the team of content creators to produce content to promote Gyeonggi, self planned trips to create content to promote Gyeonggi that suits your audience, online missions given by the administration. (Promoting events, and news of Gyeonggi tourism)'
	Gyeonggi-do	Gyeonggi Province Honorary Ambassador	Translation and spread of disaster, administrative and other information from/about Gyeonggi province on social media; Provision of advice on province's policies and promotional activities.	2 years	'Translate and interpret disaster safety and administrative news, (..) deliver information via social media and community channels, (..) Advise on policies and promotional activities, (..) participate in job-related training program and monthly report submission.'
	Gangwon-do Tourism Organisation	Yeongwol Train Tour to the Full Moon	Promotion of tourism in Yeongwol.	2 days	'Submission of trip report, uploading personal trip reviews on social media (2 photo reviews and 1 short video (reels etc), Instagram posting on the second day of break is mandatory, participation in survey.'
	Jeollanam-do Tourism Organisation	2023 JEOLLANAM-	Promotion of tourism in	6 months	'Reposting one or more posts from Jeollanam-do Tourism Organization's

		DO GLOBAL SUPPORTERS	Jeollanam province.		Instagram page (@jnto.2020) per month in your personal account (the supporters with the most active participation will be selected for special benefits). (...) Content creation: Participating in one on-site program in Jeollanam-do (options will be given during orientation) and creating content during the visit.'
	Jeollanam-do	Jeonnam DMGY Trip Supporters	Promotion of tourism in Jeonnam province	2 days	'Submission of application and final report, visit four tourist destinations (2 days, 1 night), 4 tabler reviews, 4 Instagram posts, 1 Instagram reel, submission of satisfaction survey.'
	Seongju City	Real Korea, Authentic Seongju	Promotion of tourism and culture of Seongju City.	4 days	'During the trip: 2~3 IG stories per day. After the trip: more than 5 digital content (Instagram / Facebook posts, YouTube, TikTok videos, etc...); Social Media (carousel posting of the tour spots (at least 3 pictures and details of the spots), Reels that is full of creativity and shows the beauty of the place, Add Instagram Highlights for "Seongju") YouTube (Last longer than 5 minutes), Blog (Write an article from the perspective of the individual tourist containing Information that would help foreign tourists + at least 5 decent pictures).'
		Tongyeong Workation Program	Promotion of Tongyeong city as a destination for digital nomads.	3 days	'Create at least 2 contents in you main social media channel relating to the 'Tongcation' program for promotion. (Work and Tour) + 5 or more stories during the program.'
	Tongyeong City	2023 투나잇 통영 글로벌 서포터즈 TONIGHT TongYeong!	Promotion of tourism in Tongyeong city.	2 days	'Produce and post promotional contents for Tongyeong night tourism through personal social media after the tour.'

		Global Supporters			
	Daegu City & Andong City	Daegu & Andong Foodie Adventures	Promotion of tourism and culture of Daegu & Andong.	2 days	'During the trip: 2~3 Instagram Stories per day. After the trip: more than 2 digital content pieces (Instagram/TikTok posts, YouTube videos, etc.).'
	Daegu Foundation for Culture & Arts (2024) / Daegu Tourism Bureau (2020)	2020 & 2024 Daegu & Gyeongbuk Global Tourism Supporters	Promote City of Daegu and Gyeongbuk area	8 Months	'Create more than 26 contents on Daegu tourism (on Daegu tourism policies, festivals, and news - 3 times a month, engaging content about living in Daegu that suits your audience - once a month, write reviews for domestic travel platforms - once a month, Analysis of domestic tourism policies and suggestions for Daegu tourism - 1 session, Participate in 3 group tours.'
	Busan Tourism Organization	Busan Tourism Global Supporters	Promotion of tourism in Busan.	9 months	'Accomplish missions assigned by BTO. Upload SNS contents promoting Busan Tourism (photographs and videos).'
	Seoul Metropolitan Government	Seoul Foreign Language SNS Supporters, Seouliters	Promotion of Seoul in different languages.	10 months	'Produce one short-form video each month on a topic related to Seoul.'
	Seoul Metropolitan Government / Seoul Tourism Organisation	Global Seoul Mate	Promotion of tourism in Seoul.	8 months each edition	'Create photography or video-based content to promote the visited attractions, festivals, and events and upload it on your personal social media account.'

Part 3 of the table:

Scale	Governmental body in charge	Supporter Program name	No. of people recruited	Target group of the program	Incentives offered for SMIs
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NATION-WIDE	KTO	Adventure Korea	35	'Foreigners who are residing in Korea from countries in Europe, America, Oceania; high interest in traveling in Korea and is active on social media, able to participate in organised tours.'	'Travel expenses provided (transportation, accommodation and meals), Rewards and prizes for the best contents, Certificate of Completion (Upon completion of activities in full), Adventure Korea Reporters Press Card, welcome gift, Opportunities to participate in major events of the KTO.'
		WOW Korea	110	'Any citizens of Middle East and Asia residing in Korea (SE Asia, Western Asia, Central Asia, Middle East etc.), active user of social media and loves traveling Korea.'	'Travel opportunities around Korea, experience the newest local activities and K-POP related show, Chance to be involved in Korea Tourism Organization's major tourism project, Opportunities to meet Korea's major YouTubers, certificate of completion at the end of the program, Participants are appointed as SNS supporters of Korea Tourism Organization.'
		KTO SNS Supporters	20	'Foreigners from Europe, North and South America, Africa and Oceania living in Korea, High interest in Korean culture and active user of social media service (fluency in Korean preferred, not required), Available to participate in FAM	'A chance to travel around Korea throughout the year (Transportation, accommodation, and meals provided), Opportunities to attend FAM tours and ceremonies organized by KTO, Rewards and prizes for

				tours throughout 2021.'	outstanding contents, Participation Certificate (Upon completion of activities in full), 'KTO SNS' Supporters Press Card, welcome gift, etc.'
	MOFA	Koreaz	20 (10 international, 10 Korean)	'10 international, 10 Korean: Proficiency in English and Korean, Youth residing in Korea with an interest in public diplomacy, Digital content creation skills (Video and Photo editing), Active personal social media presence.'	'Monthly stipend; awards for outstanding creators, Certificate of Appointment and Completion, opportunities to experience MOFA-organised events, training opportunities for digital content creators.'
		Korea Allimi (Unboxing Korea)	60	'Foreign residents in Korea, active social media users able to create various forms of content (experience in creating videos preferred), able to actively promote and participate in Korea Allimi activities.'	'Participants will be invited to year-round Unboxing Korea thematic tour programs. Outstanding participants will be awarded at the end of the program. Participants will receive small monetary compensation for their activities. '
LOCAL (Provinces, Cities)	KTO	Busan Marine Adventures	12	'Foreign digital creators. Applicants who have more than 5,000 followers/subscribers are preferred (Instagram or YouTube, etc).'	'Free Accommodation, Meals, Transportation (Seoul-Busan Round trip), Interesting Activities.'
		[Starry Night in Busan] Busan Night Trip Exploring Event	20	'Foreign digital creators. Applicants who have more than 3,000 followers/subscribers are preferred (Instagram or YouTube, etc).'	Free Accommodation, Meals, Transportation (Busan Round Trip), Tickets for some night activities, Chance to make new

					friends from all around the world.'
	Gyeonggi Tourism Organization	- Oh! My Gyeonggi (O.M.G)	25-35	'Foreigners, 18+, residing in Seoul or Gyeonggi area, without legal reasons for disqualification, can speak English or Korean, active on SNS (YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Blog, Facebook etc), available to participate in 4 trips, can produce high-quality photos, videos, and written content that inspire others.'	'Free trips to Gyeonggi landmarks, festivals, events, Chance to network, Content marketing trainings by professionals, Branded souvenirs exclusively for supporters, Official certificate of appointment & completion, Special rewards for the creators with exceptional performance who put in most effort.'
	Gyeonggi-do	Gyeonggi Province Honorary Ambassador	20	'Foreign Residents of Gyeonggi Province, Advanced Korean language skills (TOPIK levels 5-6 or completion of level 5 in the social integration program), Preference for those who completed translation training at the Gyeonggi Institute of Research and Policy Development for Migrants' Human Rights (GMHR), Experience in community and immigrant rights activities is a plus, Experience in translation and promotional activities using social media is a plus (preferably with over 1,000 followers).'	'Appointment certificates, modest payments for activities, and [re]commendations from the Governor of Gyeonggi Province, with two honorary ambassadors being selected for outstanding activities every year.'
	Gangwon-do Tourism Organisation	Yeongwol Train Tour to the Full Moon	30	'Foreigners aged 18 or over residing in Korea, active social media users (Instagram, YouTube etc.),	'Free trip: Yeongwol Train Tour to the Full Moon.'

				people interested in tourism in Gangwondo.'	
	Jeollanam-do Tourism Organisation	2023 JEOLLANAM-DO GLOBAL SUPPORTERS	50	'Foreigners living in Korea (legal immigration status), active social media users (Instagram, YouTube etc.), people interested in tourism in Jeonnam.'	'Reimbursement for up to 150,000 KRW for trip expenses, Jeonnam tourism souvenirs, luxury Jeonnam tour for 10 outstanding supporters, Jeonnam global supporter certificate.'
	Jeollanam-do	Jeonnam DMGY Trip Supporters	13 teams	'Foreigners aged 18 or over residing in Korea, ARC, no tax issues, individuals active on social media, those willing to participate in marketing materials.'	'Activity compensation of 400,000 KRW.'
	Seongju City	Real Korea, Authentic Seongju	10	'Foreign digital creators. Applicants who have more than 5,000 followers/subscribers are preferred (Instagram or YouTube, etc).'	'Free Accommodation, Meals, Transportation (Seoul-Seongju Round trip), Networking & Team building program, Chilling and peaceful experiences in Seongju areas.'
		Tongyeong Workation Program	8	'Digital nomads, content creators, and workers who wish to experience the workation in Tongyeong. *Applicants who has more than 2,000 followers/subscribers are preferred.'	'Free workspace, Accommodation, Meals (lunch and dinner), Transportation, Tickets for some activities, sun set tour and yacht ride.'
	Tongyeong City	2023 투나잇 통영 글로벌 서포터즈 TONIGHT TongYeong! Global Supporters	40 (20 Korean students / 20 foreign students))	'Students interested in traveling who can actively interact with international students. Students who enjoy using social media.'	'Free participation in Tongyeong Night Tour.'

	Daegu City & Andong City	Daegu & Andong Foodie Adventures	12	'Digital creators preferably with 5,000+ followers/subscribers on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube.'	'Free Accommodation, Free Meals, Free Transportation (Seoul-Daegu & Andong Round Trip), Free Activities.'
	Daegu Foundation for Culture & Arts (2024) / Daegu Tourism Bureau (2020)	2020 & 2024 Daegu & Gyeongbuk Global Tourism Supporters	10	'Foreigners, 18+, preferably residing in Daegu & Gyeongbuk area, without legal reasons for disqualification, can speak English or Korean, active on SNS (YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Blog, Facebook etc), available to participate in more than 3 trips + opening ceremony, can produce high-quality photos, videos, and written content that inspire others.'	'Activity allowance of up to 300,000 won, Free trips to the most iconic Daegu & Gyeongbuk landmarks, Content marketing training by professionals, Chance to participate in various Daegu festivals and events, Official certificate of appointment & completion, Special rewards for the creators with exceptional performance who put in most effort.'
	Busan Tourism Organization	Busan Tourism Global Supporters	10 (2017: not specified; 2018: English 6, Japanese 4)	'Any Busan Universities' international students active on SNS who can work for at least 1 year.'	'Certificates of completion, payment of monthly activity fee, payment of activity excellence award. Busan tourist attraction fam tour (5 times a year).'
	Seoul Metropolitan Government	Seoul Foreign Language SNS Supporters, Seouliters	16 people (8 English speakers, 2 Simplified Chinese speakers, 2 Traditional Chinese speakers, 4 Japanese speakers)	'Anyone who loves Seoul. Foreign residents living in Korea during the activity period Individuals with their own Instagram account. Individuals with video and content planning and production skills.'	'Welcome goods, content production lectures, monetary compensation, content creation support, production guide manual.'

	Seoul Metropolitan Government / Seoul Tourism Organisation	Global Seoul Mate	150 in 2024 (vary per edition)	'Non-Korean nationals who have a passion for the city of Seoul and are interested in the city's global promotion. Legal residents of ROK. Everyone is eligible to apply regardless of age, gender, nationality, and area of residence in Korea. Creators that operate a public, not private, account. Experienced creators who can deal with multimedia content creation via photography or videos.'	'Complete missions at least once a month to receive a designated activity fee. Entrance to festivals, attractions, events, induction and closing ceremonies, workshops. Additionally: merchandise.'
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Appendix 3: Interviewee details

Demographics of interviewees.

Number assigned to the interviewee	Nationality	Gender Identity	Age group	Occupation	Full-time social media influencer	Visa type	Length of stay in Korea ⁹
1	Czech Republic	Female	20-29	Student	no	Student visa	4 months
2	Russia	Female	30-39	Manager	yes	Employment visa	2.5 years
3	Lithuania	Female	30-39	Teacher	no	Residence Visa	8 years
4	Bulgaria	Male	40-49	Startup founder	no	Start-up Investment Visa	8 years

Appendix 4: Themes identified during the thematic analysis of interviews

Level 0	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
	Deductive analysis		

⁹ At the time of the interview.

Motivations and experience of participating in support programs.	Reciprocity & Mutual Benefits	Experience of SMIs	High reward compared with input
			Bargain / privilege
			Fun / Interesting
			Banner trips
			Different each program
			Overburdening of participants
		Opportunities for Korea	Positive PR
	SM content		
	Costs and Rewards of Engagement	Costs	Creating SM content
			Stress
			High expectations
		Rewards	Financial
			Social
			Entertainment & Travel
			Personal
	Comparison Level	Comparison of the initiative with other countries	Uniqueness of Korea
			Enhancement of Korea's image on global scale
Comparison of programs		Agencies' role	
		Government's role	
		Positive experience	
		Negative experience	

	Commitment (Relationship) Stability	Participation	Repeated participation
			Keeness to apply again
		Promotion	Keeness to recommend to others
			Voluntary restraint
	Power Dynamics in Supporter Programs	Rules of participation	Relaxed rules
			Freedom of expression
			Implicit consequences for non-compliance / negative posts
			Lack of hard consequences
			Technical Guidelines
	Motivations for Engagement	Economic	Source of income / vouchers
			Free services/merchandise/travel
		Travel & Exploration	Entertainment
			Visiting new sites
			Filling free time
		Social	Networking
Prestige			
Korea's Public Diplomacy	Inductive analysis		
	Pre-existing ties with Korea	Pre-existing interest in Culture	K-pop / k-drama
			K-cuisine
			Meeting Koreans abroad
		Education	

		Immigration reason and status	Living	
			Work / own business	
		Cultural Fit	Cultural alignment	
			Cultural dissonance	
		Experience of living in Korea	Positive	
			Bitter-sweet	
			Exceptional	
		Social media	SMI's Reasons for Posting about Korea on SM	Personal / Hobby
				Supporter programs
	Reshaping image of Korea			
	Making Korea more Accessible to foreigners			
	Positive reinforcement loop			
	Competition with other SMIs			
	Portrayal of Korea on the SMI's SM content		Positive	
			Authentic	
			Voluntary restraint	
	Impact of participating in supporter programs on SMI's perceptions about Korea and their experience of living in the country	Exploration of Korea	Broadening knowledge about Korea and understanding of its culture	
			Encouraged exploration beyond Seoul	
		Increased confidence in solo travel in Korea due to supportive programs		
		Opportunity to build a community		

		Enhanced experience of living in Korea	Facilitating acclimatisation in the country
		Enhanced perception of Korea	'Newborn love for Korea'
			Positive view of Korea when compared with other countries.

Appendix 5: Participant Information Sheet

Person responsible for the study: Katarzyna Ozga

Contact information: author contact information was provided in copies for participants

Participant Information Sheet

Researcher bio: My name is Katarzyna Ozga and I am from Poland. I am a master's student at the Centre of East Asian Studies at the University of Turku in Finland. I am pursuing a degree in Social Sciences with a major in East Asian Studies. Currently I am on a student exchange in South Korea at Kyung Hee University. Before pursuing a master's degree, I graduated with a bachelor's degree in International Relations and Development from the University of Westminster in London, United Kingdom.

Project Title: 'Voices from abroad: An Analysis of the Experience and Drivers Behind Foreign SMIs' Advocacy for South Korea on social media.'

General Outline of the Project:

Description and Methodology: The aim of the study is to collect interview data from foreign social media influencers living permanently in South Korea. I aim to analyse their motivations and experience of posting about South Korea on social media and participating in various Supporter Programs (official opportunities organised by central and local governments for foreigners in exchange for social media posts about South Korea). Since the foreign population is constantly growing in South Korea and the country's culture continuously attracts foreign attention, I believe it is very interesting and important to understand why foreigners participate in promotion of South Korea on social media and how that fits into South Korea's public diplomacy strategy.

Participants: Thank you for your interest in supporting my research. You, and other participants of this study are foreign social media influencers living in South Korea, who participated in at least one official initiative organised by the central or local governments in South Korea or by affiliated private agencies. You and other participants were identified through your open communication on social media about your participation in those activities or through your use of specific campaign hashtags. Some participants might have been identified through a direct referral of other interview participants. Approximately 10 to 15 participants, including you, will be interviewed for the purpose of this research.

Use of Data: Your collected data will only be used to inform a Master's Thesis and the results of the research will be published in due time after completion of the thesis in University of Turku's UTUPub Database (<https://www.utupub.fi>) where the thesis or its abstract can be found under my name.

Participant Involvement:

Voluntary Participation & Withdrawal: Please know that your participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or stop taking part in the study at any time without providing an explanation. If you would like to withdraw given consent, you can do it at any time by letting me know during the interview or by contacting me at kaozga@utu.fi. Refusal to participate, suspension of interview and withdrawal will not impact you negatively in any way. In case of withdrawal from the study, your data will be returned to you and/or destroyed, depending on your preference. While participating in the interview you are welcome to ask additional questions about the study and refuse to answer any of the asked questions without explanation. If you'd like to postpone the interview or continue the rest in a later date, please let me know and I will make sure to arrange a new meeting at a date convenient for you.

What does participation in the research entail?: While participating in this study, I will first request that you read thoroughly this information factsheet, sign the Informed Consent Form, and provide demographic data. Upon completing the paperwork, I will invite you to participate in the in-person one-on-one interview with me. I intend to ask around 20 questions, but the number might vary depending on the extensiveness of your answers and the flow of our conversation. During the interview, the information would be collected through audio recording and in writing by me, but I will not attempt to take any pictures or videos of you. You are welcome to opt-out of the audio recording, and if the consent is not given, I will

only collect information by writing down your answers manually on the laptop. Even if you consent to audio recording, you are welcome to ask me to stop it at any point, if you prefer to answer any of the questions 'off the record'.

Location and Duration: The interviews will take part in-person in South Korea. I will invite you for an interview in a public place, for example a quiet café in a location convenient for you. You are also welcome to recommend the location that you feel comfortable with. I initially intend to conduct only one interview that will last between 60 and 90 minutes. However, if after analysing all the interviews I see a need and if you give me consent, I might contact you and ask to participate in the second interview. Your participation in the second interview is also voluntary.

Risks: I will do my utmost best to ensure that all the information that you provide is stored safely and is not accessed by any third party. However, as with all online activities, there is a small risk that your data might be exposed to the outside due to hacker attack and other online crime activities. In order to mitigate this, all the data will be only stored on my personal devices and online drive (Seafile, server located in Turku, Finland) that only I have access to. You can read more about Seafile security features at:
https://manual.seafile.com/security/security_features/.

Benefits: Unfortunately I cannot provide any benefits for you personally, but I will pay for our food and drinks at a café where we will meet for the interview. I also hope that my research will contribute to some degree to my academic discipline and anyone interested in the growing importance of social media, social media influencers and South Korea's public diplomacy.

Confidentiality: I will use my best efforts to keep your information confidential both during the interview process and publication of the research. I will be the only person who will have an insight into our interview recording, transcript and notes. In the published research, I will refer to you using assigned number (e.g. Interviewee 1). I will not disclose your real name, surname, social media tag or a combination of your demographic data that could make you identifiable in any way, unless you give me permission to do so. However, during the interview and at any point of our communication, please do not disclose any sensitive or defamatory information, for example about illegal activities or anyone causing harm to others, as I might be legally required to disclose such information.

Queries and Concerns: Contact Details for More Information: If you have more questions, please contact me through the contact information that you can find at the beginning of this form. You can also contact the supervisor of this research, Sabine Burghart through phone (+358 29 450 3057) or e-mail (sabine.burghart@utu.fi). In addition, you can contact the Center of East Asian Studies at ceas@utu.fi.

Privacy Notice

1. Data Controller: The data controller for this research study is Katarzyna Ozga, a master's student at the University of Turku. You can contact the data controller at kaozga@utu.fi.

2. Purpose of Data Collection: For the purpose of this research, I will only collect your demographic data, not personal data such as name, surname etc. The purpose of collecting your demographic data is solely to ensure validity and relevance of my research and provide more context to my findings.

3. Types of Data Collected: During the interview process, we will collect the following types of data:

- Demographic data: gender identity, nationality, age group (not exact age), occupation, visa type in South Korea, length of stay in South Korea.
- Responses to interview questions
- Any additional information voluntarily provided by you during the interview

4. Data Processing: I will only be collecting demographic data. Your demographic data will be processed for research purposes only. It will be securely stored and analysed to fulfill the objectives of the master's thesis. The data will be processed in compliance with the *EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)*: Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation), OJ 2016 L 119/1.

5. Data Storage and Security: Your demographic data will be stored securely on password-protected devices and/or encrypted cloud storage services Seafile. Only I will have access to the data. Measures will be taken to ensure that your data remains confidential and protected against unauthorized access, disclosure, alteration, or destruction.

6. Data Retention: Your demographic data will be retained for the duration of the research project, which is expected to be finalised by the end of January 2025.

7. Data Sharing: Your personal data will not be shared with any third parties without your explicit consent, except where required by law.

8. Your Rights: You have the following rights regarding your personal data:

- The right to access your demographic data.
- The right to rectify any inaccurate or incomplete data.
- The right to erasure of your data (subject to legal requirements).
- The right to restrict processing of your data.
- The right to data portability.
- The right to object to the processing of your data.
- The right to withdraw your consent at any time.

To exercise any of these rights or if you have any questions or concerns about the processing of your personal data, please contact the data controller.

9. Consent: By participating in the interview, you consent to the collection, processing, and storage of your demographic data for the purposes outlined in this privacy notice.

Appendix 6: Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM for Participants of Research

‘Voices from abroad: An Analysis of the Experience and Drivers Behind Foreign SMIs’
Advocacy for South Korea on social media.’

Katarzyna Ozga

Author contact information was provided in copies for participants.

I have read and understood the Information Sheet and Privacy Notice you have given me, and I agree to all the terms and to participate in the project.	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to this interview being audio-recorded	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to be identified in the following way within research outputs:	

Full name / social media tag	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
Pseudonym [i.e. alternative name/code for participant chosen by researcher]	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
Impersonal attribution [e.g. by profession: student, company worker, University Lecturer/Teacher, social media influencer; by age group; by gender identity]	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to be contacted again if needed for the further research	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>

 Name of Participant Date Signature

 Name of person taking consent Date Signature

Appendix 7: Demographic Data Form

Demographic data form for Participants of Research

‘Voices from abroad: An Analysis of the Experience and Drivers Behind Foreign SMIs’
 Advocacy for South Korea on social media.’

Katarzyna Ozga

Author contact information was provided in copies for participants.

Nationality	
Gender Identity	<input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Transgender <input type="checkbox"/> Non-binary/non-conforming <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say
Age Group	<input type="checkbox"/> Below 20 years old <input type="checkbox"/> 20 – 29 years old <input type="checkbox"/> 30 – 39 years old <input type="checkbox"/> 40 – 49 years old <input type="checkbox"/> 50 – 59 years old <input type="checkbox"/> 60+ years old <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say
Occupation	

Are you a full-time social media content creator?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Visa type	<input type="checkbox"/> Tourist visa (Type B) <input type="checkbox"/> Student visa (D-2) <input type="checkbox"/> Language training visa (D-4) <input type="checkbox"/> Employment visa (Professor-Ship E-1, Foreign Language Teaching E-2, Research E-3, Professional Employment E-5, Special Occupation E-7, Non-professional employment E-9, etc.) <input type="checkbox"/> Job-Seeking (D-10) or Business Startup (D-10-2) <input type="checkbox"/> Working-holiday visa (H-1) <input type="checkbox"/> Residence visa (Co-habitation F-1, Residence F-2, Dependent Family F-3, Overseas Koreans F-4, Permanent Residence F-5, Marriage Immigration F-6, and other type F visas) <input type="checkbox"/> Government official (Type A) <input type="checkbox"/> Short term employment, visit, business; temporary news coverage (Type C) <input type="checkbox"/> Miscellaneous (G-1: Humanitarian Status, Refugee Status, etc.) <input type="checkbox"/> Military (M-1) <input type="checkbox"/> Other Please specify if you selected 'other': <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say
How long have you lived in South Korea in total (in years or months)	