Cultural Mediation in International Exchange Programs:
Personalization, Translation, and Coproduction
in Exchange Participant Blogs

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This study analyzes cultural mediation in international exchange participant blogs, exploring their significance for relational public diplomacy. We recognize exchange participant blogs as a site of public diplomacy at work. Moving beyond the dominant assumption guiding exchange programs as exporting values and ideas to foreign publics, we consider the extent to which the public engages in the processes of meaning making. Narrative inquiry of blogs written by participants of German and Japanese government exchange programs finds that the participants negotiate their everyday encounters with the host by personalizing, translating, and coproducing their experiences for and with the audience. The narratives convey a complicated and nuanced understanding of the host country that is interpreted through the lens of cultural and social identity embodied by the participants. The sequential and the fiction-like storytelling quality of the blogs transport audiences into the narrative world, resulting in enjoyment, emotional attachment, and identification with bloggers from their audience.

Keywords: cultural mediation, public diplomacy, international exchange programs, soft power, narrative analysis

People-to-people exchange, which covers a broad range of cultural, professional, and academic exchange programs on an international level, represents one of the longest standing public diplomacy initiatives. Public diplomacy (PD) is a "process of communicating 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" (Tuch, 1990, p. 3). What distinguishes PD from other forms of diplomatic initiatives is that it highlights the role of ordinary citizens as both targets and agents in the process of communicating about national policies, culture, and political beliefs. Research on "everyday diplomacy" (Constantinou, 2016; Marsden, Ibañez-Tirado, & Henig, 2016), for example, emphasizes the plurality of cultural forms and

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exchanges by nonstate actors who traverse boundaries and engage in "daily non-official encounters with a wide range of 'significant' or 'less significant' others" (Constantinou, 2016, p. 31).

Everyday forms of diplomacy, such as people-to-people exchange, is received with less suspicion by both parties compared with that led by an official state actor, as ordinary citizens are perceived to be less motivated by state interest (Nye, 2010). Furthermore, personal contact is said to lead to a more "humanized" understanding of host nation-states (Nye, 2004), helping individuals see the host beyond reductionist cultural stereotypes (de Lima, 2007; El-Nawawy, 2006). Exchange participants, in turn, pass down their perspectives of the host country onto their friends and family back home. Previous studies have used the terms "culture carrier" (Eide, 1970) or "cultural mediator" (Bochner, 1981; Snow, 2008; Wilson, 1988) in referring to the role of exchange participants in bridging cultures and contributing to maintaining peace.

Despite the positive assessment of the role of exchange participants as cultural mediators, there is, in general, a lack of research on exchange programs from a PD perspective (see Kim, 2016). Research on cultural mediation falls behind recent developments, especially in terms of the move to the online sphere. Public diplomacy programs increasingly integrate online platforms to communicate and maintain relationships with target audiences. Research on digital diplomacy is growing, but most examine official state channels of communication geared to foreign publics (Bjola & Jiang, 2015; Dodd & Collins, 2017; Kampf, Manor, & Segev, 2015). It is much slower to catch up with everyday forms of diplomacy taking place online.

In this study, we examine blogging practices of exchange participants in Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) as a form of cultural mediation. In light of the dearth of theoretical research on cultural mediation, we introduce the notion of the key influencer from online marketing research to analyze the narrative strategies of exchange participants in blogs, specifically, how exchange participants engage in meaning making of different aspects of their host country, how the audiences respond to the blog posts, and the relational dynamics between the bloggers and audiences. By highlighting the interactional aspect of the exchange participant blogs, we seek to advance an understanding of cultural mediation as a relational, rather than an informational process (Zaharna, 2009; Zaharna, Arsenault, & Fisher, 2014).

The purpose of this study is to explore how exchange participants engage in meaning making of different aspects of their host country in their blogs and the relational dynamics between the bloggers and their audiences. In so doing, we seek to contribute to broadening the theoretical basis of cultural mediation in PD amid heightened cross-border mobility of people and ideas.

Exchange Programs as Relational Public Diplomacy

Exchange programs are often engendered from foreign policy and national image concerns (Scott-Smith, 2008). The JET program was founded in 1987 as part of its internationalization policy (*kokusaika*), amid growing international criticism toward Japan's insensitivity to racial and ethnic diversity in both domestic and international spheres (Burgess, 1986; Sargent, 2018). The JET program was envisioned as a diplomatic tool to "open up" Japanese society and to project the nation-state as open-minded, culturally

sensitive, and willing to "foster international perspectives by promoting international exchange at the grassroots levels as well as intensifying foreign language education" (McConnell, 2008, p. 19).

The foreign policy interest echoes in the case of Germany (Dinnie, 2015; Hülsse, 2009, p. 300). The DAAD service partnered in the nation-state's branding campaign and implemented the Study in Germany—Land of Ideas initiative. It promotes Germany as a study and research destination, which comprises a principle goal of the nation-state's foreign cultural policy.

Research on exchange programs offers an opportunity to advance the theoretical and conceptual basis of the relational framework of PD. PD literature aligns exchange programs with the logic of soft power (Atkinson, 2010; Nye, 2008). From a soft power perspective, the dominant assumption guiding exchange programs is that ideas and values can be exported to the minds of foreign students. However, amid prevalent use of networked forms of communication technology, Nye (2019) stresses that exchanges are more effective than broadcasting because exchanges allow one to "understand how [others] are hearing your messages and adapting accordingly" (p. 14).

Cultural policy studies point out the need to consider the extent to which audiences are implicated in the processes of meaning making (Ang, Isar, & Mar, 2015; Clarke, 2016; Iwabuchi, 2015). The attraction of the resources of soft power, such as cultures, ideals, and policies, is said to be subjective, and thus their universal appeal can never be assumed (Gardels, 2005). Second, PD is seen as taking an essentialist assumption of soft power, as a rational deployment of a "stock" of cultural and political values (Yun & Toth, 2009). In this regard, Yun and Toth (2009) emphasize the relational aspect of PD in arguing that the actual soft power and its real resources are not what a country has as "stocks" (something at its disposal), but rather "the country's 'constructivist and fluid capacity' to create mutual trust in constant interaction" (p. 501). Echoing Yun and Toth's phrase "fluid capacity," Clarke (2016) asserts that policy makers, institutional and individual implementors, and audiences all engage in consumption, production, and negotiation of meaning making. These studies point to the need for greater attention to be paid to the function of culture in terms of consumer identity.

Taking a cultural approach to PD opens the space to examine exchange programs from a relational perspective. One such way is to look at exchange programs as a formal "contact point" (Zaharna, 2018, pp. 318–319), which serves as a conduit of joint activities that may mediate trust, cognitive understanding, and emotional bonding among PD actors. Such relational framework stresses "participation over presentation" (Zaharna, 2009, p. 90). Saunders (2013) likens participation to a "shifting kaleidoscope with groups of citizens interacting around common concerns" (p. 136) in boundaries that are permeable. Cultural mediation, or the act of sharing perspectives about a host country with one's social network, needs to take account of the relational context.

Exchange Programs and Cultural Mediation

Cultural mediator plays a linking or bridging role between the host and home that reconciles differences among cultures (Bochner, 1981; Snow, 2008). Existing studies suggest that cultural mediation

is better aligned with the long-term goal of mutual understanding and dialogue rather than pushing short-term foreign policy interests on the exchange participants (Cull, 2008; Snow, 2008).

Nancy Snow (1992) suggests that cultural mediation tends to be enacted by international exchange participants who exhibit closer ties to the host nationals and have a larger network of multicultural people in the host country. Based on interviews with Fulbright Scholars in the United States, Sevin (2010) states that the Fulbright Program could become an effective tool for transforming foreign scholars into cultural ambassadors by overcoming diverse barriers that could occur in intercultural communication. In particular, bringing people together in a single project encourages cultural mediation as exchange participants confront cultural differences and misunderstandings rather than "assuming cohabitation and shared experiences would yield some form of public diplomacy benefit, such as mutual understanding, resolution of differences, and explanations of cultural difference" (Hayden, 2009, p. 536).

There is a dearth of research on the deeper meaning-making process in which exchange participants engage in relation to different aspects of the host country. As social media breaks down the private and the public (Lange, 2007), this process becomes open to public scrutiny and engagement. The act of writing a blog, for example, becomes both an intimate and a public act (Hookway, 2008).

Advancing Cultural Mediation From a Key Influencer Perspective

Key influencer communication online reflects a shift in marketing communication from a top-down, mediated flow of communication by opinion leaders to a multidirectional, coproduced model of strategic communication (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010). The spread of Web 2.0 has blurred the boundary of production and consumption, where producing and crafting has come to form "a key part of the act of consumption" (Beer & Burrows, 2010, pp. 3–4). In large part due to the networked structure of social media, individuals located at the "hub" of brand communities are ordinary consumers who do not represent or hold a formal position in the organization that they are writing about (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2013). Such consumer-to-consumer communication is perceived to have greater credibility than marketer-led forms of communication, as the information is considered to be subjective and independent (Li & Du, 2011).

These individuals, who we refer to as "key influencers," employ narrative storytelling strategies that engage and resonate with the audiences (Escalas, 2004; Gretzel, 2006; McCabe & Foster, 2006). Just as people interpret their experiences by fitting them into a story, consumers create a link between a brand and the self as they map the information to personally relevant stories (Escalas, 2004). In examining a seeding campaign, Kozinets and colleagues (2010) demonstrate how bloggers adapt product endorsement to align with their personal characteristics, occupation, and financial situation, among other things. Such expressions of self-identity are referred to as "character narratives," and defined as "enduring personal stories or accounts that we may understand as being related to particular expressed character types" (Kozinets et al., 2010, p. 74). By incorporating the brand/product into the personal narrative, the connection between the self and the brand is formed in terms of perceived benefits, such as achievement of self-related goals (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2008).

By weaving their experiences with a product into their everyday accounts, key influencers partake in localizing and adapting information into a culturally identifiable narrative (Kozinets et al., 2010). In this regard, key influencers take less of an overtly strategic communicative role. It can be said that by melding strategic information into their day-to-day accounts, their role is not to persuade intellectually but to invoke identification by the audience (Banyai & Glover, 2012).

Identification takes place through the use of narratives to present "thick" experiential aspects (Gretzel, 2006). The messages, writing style, and tone are also identified as having an influence on the relational aspect in terms of how engaged an audience feels and how encouraged they are to interact with the influencers (Li & Du, 2011). Drawing on the notion of narrative transportation (Green & Brock, 2000), Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2008) suggest that audience immersion in stories leads to persuasion. Transportation theory posits the causes and the consequences of an audience becoming absorbed into a story. As the audience become highly involved with and attached to a protagonist, they may be more likely to be swayed by the feelings or beliefs of those characters (Green & Brock, 2000).

Furthermore, communicating with a sense of humor, admitting mistakes, treating others as human, and using a conversational voice in blog posting are effective relational maintenance strategies, encouraging audiences to come back to the blog (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). In particular, Kelleher and Miller (2006) suggest that audiences are attracted to stories with a "human voice" or conversational style of writing, rather than official organizational information.

Finally, the influencer and the consumers are active coproducers of meaning of a brand (Kozinets et al., 2010, p. 72). To examine how meanings are coproduced, more recent lines of marketing research have sought to examine consumers' emotions and experiences to convey the deeper meanings of consumption experience by investigating the interaction between the consumer and the brand (Schembri, Merrilees, & Kristiansen, 2010).

Although research on exchange programs and cultural mediation have, for the most part, assumed a linear model of communication and attitude formation, the concept of the key influencer indicates the need to take into account the affective and interpretive meaning-making mechanism for both exchange participants and the audiences visiting their blogs.

Based on the relevant literature on key influencer and cultural studies approaches to PD, we define cultural mediation as a process by which the exchange participants and their audiences (re-)interpret and negotiate different aspects of a host country that exchange participants encounter during their program, such as cultural values, political ideas, and social practices. Applying the concept of key influencer to cultural mediation in exchange programs enables us to shed light on personalized and individualized approach implicated in forming and negotiating one's identity to understand experiences in host countries.

As such, this study considers exchange participant blogs as a means of cultural mediation between exchange participants and seeks to further explore the mechanisms of cultural mediation in an online blog setting. In particular, how do exchange participants engage in meaning making of different aspects of their

host country in their blogs? How do audiences respond to the blogs? What kinds of relational dynamics between the bloggers and audiences are visible in the blogs?

Method

Narrative inquiry seeks to uncover the perspectives that shape the ways in which social actors understand and make sense of certain events and phenomena (Chase, 2005). Following Booth and Matic's (2011) index of blogger influence, we selected 16 blogs featured on the DAAD and AJET websites that had the highest (1) number of viewers, (2) post frequency, and (3) quantity of comments. Eight DAAD blogs were selected from the official DAAD blog page,[1] which features blog entries by international students studying in Germany. We also selected eight JET blogs, which are linked to from the Association of JET (or AJET) website.[2] In total, 330 blog posts published between April 2012 and December 2017 were analyzed.

Bloggers ranged in age from 18 years to 45 years, and 59% were female. JET bloggers tended to be older, as the program is open only to college graduates. The DAAD and JET blogs are structurally different in that the DAAD bloggers have been recruited by the agency, and their stories are published directly on the agency's platform. JET bloggers, on the other hand, maintain their own blogs and use their own blog venues. Their availability on the official AJET website, however, gives the blogs more visible public presence. Despite structural differences, we examined whether there were identifiable consistencies in the pattern and structure of communication among the bloggers.

We coded inductively, looking to see how different aspects of the host country are interpreted by the bloggers. Themes that appeared prominently in blogger narratives were "personalization," "translation," and "coproduction." "Personalization" is defined as the deliberate act of selecting certain experiences to be shared in the blog and adapting the story to correspond to the overarching narrative that emerges from the social and cultural identities of the bloggers. We also coded for tone of voice, which is established through rhetorical strategies such as humor, sarcasm, exaggeration, and self-deprecation. "Translation" refers to explaining a word, phrase, or more broadly, a social custom using language that is identifiable in the context in which the blogger and the imagined audience are embedded. "Coproduction" refers to a collective production of meaning. Referring to the interactive audience, Serfaty (2004) suggests that the act of reading blogs, along with the act of writing, is a "creative process" (p. 466), which interweaves with and modifies the blog. How blogs engage the audience and, in turn, how the content is informed by the reaction of the audience makes blogging a collective production of meaning.

As such, to examine how the audiences respond to the blogs, we coded audience comments to each blog post. Four main themes appeared: "Information seeking" encompasses inquiries about the exchange program, including the application process, living abroad, and career prospects. "Absorption" covers reactions indicating entertainment aspects—becoming "hooked" on the blogs. "Identification" refers to empathic

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[1] https://www.study-in.de/blog/

[2] https://ajet.net/ AJET is a "quasi-union" that coordinates communication between the participants and relevant government ministries and offers different services to JET participants (Sargent, 2018).

attitudes toward the blogger, and "cocreation" refers to comments that convey audience perspective of bloggers' ideas through the practice of questioning, critique, support, or presenting a different interpretation.

These codes examined in depth how bloggers made sense of their experiences through storytelling, and in turn, how the audiences reacted to the narratives. As audiences come to identify with the bloggers or critically engage with their perspectives, both the exchange participants and audiences actively engage in the meaning-making process of aspects of the host country.

Analysis

Personalization in Storytelling

In a personal narrative, the self is made a protagonist (Chase, 2005). As such, self-identity is foregrounded in the blogs, bringing attention to expressions of the self as socially and culturally situated. Bloggers associate themselves not only with demographic factors such as nationality, race/ethnicity, age group, and gender but more prominently with lifestyle values, such as their love for cooking, movies, working out, and traveling. Exchange participant bloggers also tend to code their personal politics with their lifestyle values, such as a commitment toward "animal protection," "women's rights," and "working with underprivileged children." In this sense, the blogs feature "character narratives" (Kozinets et al., 2010) that draw on lifestyle vocabulary and are intricately woven throughout the blog posts, serving as interpretive devices to exchange participants' everyday cross-cultural encounters.

A prominent theme appearing in the blogs was that of "fitting in." Many bloggers explored through their writing what it means to fit in as someone who has grown up in a different culture. In trying to make sense of this and arrive at a resolution, bloggers drew on their beliefs and values expressed through their character narratives. This took place through self-reflection but was also constructed communally. JET bloggers frequently cross-referenced blogs from other foreigners living in Japan by using hyperlinks. David, a JET participant, referred to his friend's blog entry that discusses fitting in as a foreign teacher in a Japanese school and remarked, "I'm finding lots of this to be true in my own situation. I'm writing this as a sort of reflection on his entry." By featuring his friend's blog entry, David expresses support toward his friend's cultural dilemma and identifies with it by engaging in a similar reflection in his own blog.

> In terms of being part of a group, how can I, as an American, fit in when I automatically stand out? The apostle Paul (roughly) wrote that, "To the Jews, I become a Jew, to win the Jews. To the Gentiles, I become a Gentile, to win the Gentiles. I have become all things to all men, so that by all possible means, I might save some." I think it's possible to identify with being American while trying to be as Japanese as possible. Who knows? I might come out the other side better for it. (Berg, 2013)

The above passage, which is from the original blog entry of David's friend, foregrounds his religious identity as a guide to navigating the stark contrast in the American and Japanese social norms—the celebration of individual uniqueness as opposed to blending in. Here, religion serves as an anchoring point

in David's identity that helps to negotiate the cultural disjuncture. In such moments of self-reflection, exchange participant bloggers make sense out of their experiences in a personally meaningful way.

As indicated in the passage, what is noteworthy about exchange participants' experience is that it diverges from the consuming gaze of an outsider. Although the bloggers do write about traveling and visiting tourist spots during their stay (e.g., "Go to Mie's Iga Ninja Village and live like a ninja for a day!" (Barefootjon, 2015, blog post), their relationship with the host country is one of immersion in the reality of the everyday, and narrating the painful and, at the same time, the adventurous process of living in the host society. In this regard, the blogs constantly negotiate the tension between their status as cultural ambassadors on the one hand and their deeply personal, introspective narratives on the other.

What further complicates the narrative of the exchange participants is the multiple layers of identity that create a complex relationship with different aspects of the host country, such that it would be too simplistic to categorize participants' perspectives toward the host country as positive or negative. For example, non-White exchange participants tended to express insecurity about their ethnic and racial identities in both Japan and Germany; for some, this was an extension of their position as a racial minority in their home countries. As such, some exchange participants expressed frustration and perplexity when they were asked questions that simplified and reduced culture to a number of identifiable markers ("They asked me if I could do anything Singaporean" (Iggyeggieggyagnya, 2016, blog post)). And for this blogger, "performing" her culture to the host led to introspective moments reflecting on her identity as a Singaporean, ethnic Indian, and her choice to be vegetarian. Through self-reflection that involves trying to make sense out of their lived experience in a new culture, the exchange participants not only learn about the host country but also come to learn about their own identity.

In an entry entitled "All Asian People Aren't Chinese . . .," (Khlangsombat, 2015, blog post), Naritsara, who is from Thailand and studying chemistry in Berlin, expresses discomfort at consistently being labeled Chinese. She desires to be liberated from racial/ethnic markers and to be recognized for her other qualities as a student and as "a person." Such findings support the argument that although these narratives are highly personalized, they are at the same time produced by historical, cultural, and political contexts in which individuals are embedded (Bhatia, 2011). It is such context that complicate the narratives of the exchange participants' encounters, transcending simplistic perceptions toward the host country as positive or negative.

As protagonists of their narratives, many exchange participants wrote at length about their self-realization of growth and maturity from reaching out beyond their comfort levels in the host country. Structurally, self-reflexivity worked as the first step leading to self-realization (Serfaty, 2004). The blogs frequently engaged in flashbacks, looking back on the road traveled, and measuring self-transformation or lack of it. During this process, the exchange participant bloggers wrote about new relationships formed, anomalies, blunders, introspection, and growth.

The narratives took a conversational tone, employing sarcasm, sincerity, and honesty. Bloggers willingly admitted to their blunders and embarrassing situations, revealing their vulnerability. The blogs expressed doubts, insecurities, and mishaps with vividness and honesty. According to Hookway (2008), such

confessional quality is what makes online communication stand apart from face-to-face relations. The tension between the visibility and invisibility of blogger identity gives blogging a confessional quality, where a "less polished . . . self can be verbalized" (p. 97). One can express one's faults, one's mishaps—whatever might be difficult to tell as we enter the presence of others in face-to-face relations. Furthermore, commonly employed rhetorical tools included self-deprecation and exaggeration (e.g., "It's been around two weeks since I bought my bike and I still think that I am the slowest person in Münster" (Gheorghe, 2015, blog post); "whenever I shared this secret with any German or European students they would GASP [shell-shocked] and stare at me in astonishment as if I was turning into a giant purple alien with 10 arms!" (Paracha, 2015, blog post)) as well as colloquial language (e.g., "I was f*cking mortified . . . I said the Japanese word for "blow job" in the middle]of my quiet board of education—TWICE!" [Okijet, 2014, blog post)). These rhetorical strategies gave a human face to the bloggers, with which the audience was able to identify. They also added humor to the blogs, and made the story more entertaining, as in the form of watching a serial drama.

The audience identified with the stories, commenting that they are "hilarious, yet so true," and showed pleasure in following the conversational style of writing.

> I like your writing and how you try to make each entry interesting; thoughts in parenthesis, using bold and italic, many images, playing with font size, the occasional Japanese and so on. It feels more like reading a conversation and it makes your personality come through. (Louis-P., 2015)

The response supports the idea that a sense of humor, willingness to admit mistakes, perspective taking, and honesty give a human face to the bloggers, to which readers become attached (Kelleher & Miller, 2006).

Translation of Host Practices and Beliefs

For most bloggers, being cultural ambassadors did not entail positive endorsement of the host country or sympathizing with the host. Rather, the blog entries indicate that cultural mediation involves communication of ideas and information from one cultural context to another. Bloggers oftentimes went at length to introduce a culturally specific idea, customs, and rituals that lack linguistic equivalent in their native language. When Lenny, a JET participant, "officially" introduces his boyfriend who is Japanese, he provides an extensive introduction to the customs and norms in relation to dating in Japan. He details the social norm of *tatamae* and *honne (Tatamae* refers to how one interacts with others in ways that spare their feelings, whereas *honne* is what one really thinks and feels inside) to make sense out of interpersonal behaviors that many Americans may otherwise misunderstand. Lenny incorporated "man on the street" videos from social media to show how the two concepts are explained by ordinary Japanese. He then drew on his own experience of forming a romantic relationship with a Japanese man and featured a video of an American resident in Japan who shares her story from the moment of first meeting to marrying a Japanese man to the American audience.

Translation also involved drawing on the historical or social context in which the respective cultural norm or practice originated, particularly to in effort to discourage audiences from making judgments of a practice from the vantage point of the exchange participants' native culture. As such, although translation

is used to mean a transfer of information across linguistic boundaries, the blog postings show that translation refers not just to linguistic conversion but reconsideration of one's own embedded cultural presuppositions. The blog postings comprise reflection on blogger experience, researched material, and hyperlinks to audiovisual text, all of which give context and depth to cultural beliefs and practices. In introducing an annual penis festival in Japan, Patel (2013) devotes considerable space to briefing the readers about what is considered "scandalous" and "erotic" and "normal," "in the Japanese context." To distance her readers from dismissing the event as yet another affirmation of the label "porn capital of the world," Patel incorporates the historical context of pre-Westernized Japan. The passage delivers the point that stigmatization and taboo attitudes toward human sexuality were products of Western imperialism and subsequently provides links to other websites explaining about pre-Western sexual culture of Japan.

In a similar vein, Rubab, in Germany, explains about "Freikörperkultur" (FKK), a cultural movement that pursues connection with nature in one's most natural bodily state (Paracha, 2016). As Rubab, born and raised in Pakistan, painstakingly tries to understand this movement, she states "we [Pakistanis] don't reveal ourselves not due to body shame but more out of a sense [of] respect for our own selves and others." "10,000 questions, far more talks and many months later" she states her respect toward the culture of accepting the body and connection with nature as "a sense of freedom that is liberating on a very different level."

The translations worked to give texture and depth to cultural norms and practices, in other words, they produced rich, experiential descriptions of the unfamiliar rather than simplifying and reifying them. The translations were not only engaging but also identifiable by the readers because the bloggers often drew on their own culture as reference points. The process of making sense of the culture was not a neutral act but a subjective process in which meanings were constructed according to the social and cultural background in which the blogger was embedded.

Coproduction of Narrative Content

The audience of the blogs ranged widely, spanning prospective exchange participants and expatriates living in the country, people seeking to move to Germany or Japan for work, and even people who happened to randomly stumble upon the blogs. Some responses expressed the pleasure of entertainment. Reactions such as "I'm totally hooked on your blog!" suggest that there is indeed an addictive quality to the blogs and, over time, that they acquire a sustained relationship with the audience. A good number of the blog entries were said to be written in response to questions and comments from the audience received by e-mail. The responses suggest that as the audience become attached to bloggers, empathy is invoked on the part of the reader. The response below is in reaction to Rubab's posting on the aforementioned FKK culture in Germany:

> Hello there, I rarely read blogs or stories, but I saw FKK in a commercial. . . . So I turned to Google to find out about FKK and your article was the first to pop up! I read it and enjoyed very much the description and the simple wording. I felt I was the one [who] encountered the elderly couple, and later on I felt was watching a short movie. (Lili, 2016)

This response illustrates the way in which the reader becomes transported into the story, just as fiction reading is commonly associated with invoking empathy from the reader (Coplan, 2004; Oatley, 2002). Narrative strategies that position the blogger as a protagonist add fiction-like quality to the blogs, which resonate with the readers and draw empathy.

Finally, many of the blogs invited input from the audience, leaving the narrative open to the readers' own interpretation and their own additions. Frequently, the narratives organically change in shape with critical and incisive comments. For example, one reader asks, "Why do you refer to all your friends with their nationalities but talk about back home 'Africa' as if Africa is one big country? You are from Ghana first, my bro!" (Antwi-Boasiako, 2012, blog post). Such comments urge the blogger to think reflectively about ethnicity, race, and nation in their identity. The audience also exchange ideas, for example, on how best to survive cold winter months in Germany ("I live in cold weather climate and wool for winter is p[e]rfect. But traditional wool is too itchy. So now I use merino wool which is more softer and warmer" (Sara, 2018, blog post).

Responses also consist of comparative perspectives from other countries, such as discussing functional aspects like bike-riding practices in different countries. Readers oftentimes reinterpret blog content from the vantage point of different cultural (explaining from a different cultural standpoint), functional (clarifying the rules and regulations of the host country), and social (interpreting an encounter from a woman's as opposed to a man's point of view) perspectives. Taken together, the responses convey a dynamic between the blogger and the audience that goes beyond information provision. Audiences are transported to the personal journey of the blogger, in which they become emotionally attached and come to identify with the bloggers. The audiences' thoughts and ideas are also conveyed in the blogs, shaping the narratives in ways that make the exchange program bloggers influential.

Discussion

This study examines the ways in which cultural mediation entails personalization, translation, and coproduction of relevant aspects of a host country and is sustained by an attachment to the story and emotional engagement by the audience. We found that personalized narrative of the blogs and fiction-like storytelling of bloggers' everyday experiences resonate emotionally with the audience, who identify with and develop an attachment with the bloggers over time. Weaved into the personal narratives were translations of the cultural norms, values, and practices of the host. We suggest that translations may contribute to transcending stereotypical imagery and consumption of the host culture, and in so doing, invite the readers to develop a nuanced understanding of cultural beliefs and practices.

Further, the human quality and the conversational tone of the bloggers that welcome dialogue helps to build and sustain relationships with their readers. This result is in line with previous research, which found that audiences feel more encouraged to revisit webpages that convey a conversational tone of voice. Furthermore, comments to the blogs showed that the bloggers were valued for their honesty, sense of humor, and perspectives.

There is a dearth of research that examines how emotion is implicated in influence and persuasion in PD (Graham, 2014). This study demonstrates that the bloggers construct a fiction-like narrative over an extended period of time in which the bloggers depict themselves as protagonists who embark on an adventure culminating in self-realization. In this process, the audiences are "transported" into the narrative, identifying themselves with the blogger and becoming attached to the place. The study indicates that, in the online space, transportation theory (Green & Brock, 2000) may explain the mechanism by which cultural mediation takes place, that through story-consistent beliefs and favorable evaluation of the blogger-protagonist, readers develop an attachment to the place.

However, this study also finds that what distinguishes exchange programs from tourism and travel is the immersiveness of everyday life in a host country, which oftentimes push exchange participants to critically reflect on the policies, cultural values, and practices of the host country. The blog postings invoked exchanges of ideas and perspectives of the audience. However, we found that such dynamics tend to take place among blogs to which audiences were emotionally engaged. These bloggers have a more sustained following, and the comments convey a higher degree of identification with the blogger and absorption in bloggers' stories. In turn, good storytellers attract emotional engagement as well as deliberative questions and comments.

In this regard, what sets exchange participant bloggers apart from tourist bloggers is the dominant narrative which transcends fascination and feelings of elation to critical reflection of oneself and the host. We found that this takes place through translation, which is not a literal transplanting of language, but something that involves the interpretation and description of the translator (Appiah, 1993). As such, the act of translation here is not a neutral act but a narrative voice and a viewpoint. Our findings indicate that in an online sphere, thick translation can take the form of coproduction, by linking and featuring creative works by different people.

It should be pointed out that critical reflection toward the normative and cultural aspects of a host country was far more frequent for JET bloggers. This may be due to a number of reasons. First, the Japanese culture has historically been subject to exoticization by the West (Oh, 2016), which many JET exchange participants sought to deconstruct and explore in depth. In comparison, German culture, such as its music, historical thinkers, schools, and architecture, continues to be appreciated and admired by exchange participants. Indeed, the fact that exchange participants can jokingly put on the spot their German counterparts with stereotypical associations such as fastidiousness with systems and rules reflect the dominant position of the German culture. Second, there may be less critical reflection found in DAAD exchange participant blogs because the website featuring these blogs is an official DAAD website. The bloggers may feel more obligated to project the role of a public endorser of the DAAD program to a greater extent than being absorbed in self-reflection. The differences in blogger narratives according to the structure of the blog community shows that blogging and sharing perspectives is relational in nature, in which bloggers take into account expectations of audiences and, as Kozinets et al. (2010) suggests, the broader communal norm in which blogging takes place.

Conclusion

This study is one of the first to examine the blogging practices of exchange participants from a PD perspective. Our findings suggest that blogging practices and exchanges in comments may constitute cultural mediation in that they invoke critical questions, responses, and the sharing of different perspectives among exchange participant bloggers and their audiences. We found that audiences are drawn to blogger narratives and establish a relationship of empathy with the blogger-protagonist over time. Such form of influence opens the space to further advance the understanding of influence in PD.

As the study was exploratory, future studies may further examine how transport theory may be applied to influence in PD.

We also found that blogs that receive greater audience attachment deliberate and give perspectives on different aspects of a host country. A limitation in this study is that we were not able to see what goes on beyond the bounds of the blog. However, from the content of the blogs, it was apparent that conversations with the audience extended beyond the blog to e-mails, phone, and face-to-face. As such, we should be wary of according online forms of media as having the single greatest role in cultural mediation. Future studies may incorporate interviews to gain a more comprehensive understanding of cultural mediation.

Implications for Public Diplomacy Practice

This study offers several suggestions for PD practice. As human mobility continues to increase, it lays bare the contradictions in international and domestic PD. The blog entries support this, particularly in relation to societal attitudes that marginalize migrants and minority ethnic groups. This study's findings resonate with Yun and Toth's (2009) suggestion that increased people-to-people contact will make increasingly transparent "artificial resources"-based image management. Yet, at the same time, the blog postings of the participants in many ways indicate otherwise to Yun and Toth's claim that government-sponsored exchange programs for relationship building are "mostly channels of arranged, partial, and superficial contacts between elites of societies, not those of natural, practical, and total contacts among the masses" (p. 501). Although the authors rightfully assert that "relationship building must not be based on showcasing and proliferating one's own culture, values, and ideas" (p. 501), the blog postings show that in most cases, the bloggers demonstrated critical awareness of the host country. In the case of Japan, it should be acknowledged that the position of exchange participants as government employees granted them a level of respect from the community in which they were placed. Nonetheless, their experiences during multiyear sojourns with people, culture, ideals, and, most of all, domestic governance by working in schools and government institutions imbued them with critical awareness of the Japanese society.

In a study of the JET program over a 30-year period, Sargent (2018) claims, "In a way, the JET Program functions like a 'reverse Peace Corps' by bringing foreigners into the country, actively imparting 'Japaneseness' to them and seeding them throughout the international world" (p. 297). Our analysis found that the blogs conveyed critical awareness of different aspects of the Japanese culture, and the Japanese government's intention to spread a carefully curated image of Japan was not very persuasive. Government

involvement in domestic policy is an area of "soft power" that is not as actively discussed, but nonetheless, what the blogs point to is something that transcends government initiatives to promote the culture and political values of the nation.

As such, first, in an era where controlling information is close to impossible, the role of PD may be facilitated not through filtering certain aspects while emphasizing others, but by encouraging exchange participants to give the country a "human face" through rich descriptions that project the country as a complex and multidimensional construct that offers a diversity of character. Second, PD should take into account domestic public policy toward the diaspora. The discrepancy between the two may otherwise lead to negative outcomes for the image of the government.

Implications for Public Diplomacy Theory

In the field of PD, scholars note that despite a proliferation of online tools to disseminate information, the human dimension of international relations has not changed. In fact, it is stated that "the need for a relational approach to PD has never been greater" (Fitzpatrick, 2014, p. 30). These scholars suggest that relational approach to PD should be based on mutuality and shared understanding (Cowan & Arsenault, 2008). This study suggests that the interpretive aspect of exchange participants and the potential for blogs both as a site and a conduit of cultural mediation are both significant for advancing PD research. The ways in which exchange participants integrate different aspects of the host country to their personal narrative and transport the audience to their stories may serve as a form of cultural mediation that diverges from "showcasing" national culture.

In this respect, PD research needs to pay closer attention to these stories—first, to better understand the kinds of storytelling mechanisms that create emotional solidarity and sustain interest in the country, and second, to take account of the interaction taking place in the blogs. In addition to the number of exchanges, the quality of the exchanges need to be considered (Lowe, 2015). Such narrative analysis in addition to interviews with exchange participants will contribute toward further advancing the theory and practice of relational PD.

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