Korea Focus

Public Perception at the Crossroads: COVID-19 and the Media Depiction of EU Countries in South Korea

Jaemin Shim

Public Perception at the Crossroads: COVID-19 and the Media Depiction of EU Countries in South Korea

Jaemin Shim

Jaemin Shim is a Korea-Europe Programme postdoctoral research fellow at the Institute of Korean Studies, Freie Universität Berlin. Prior to the current position, he was a Fritz-Thyssen postdoctoral research fellow at the German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA) and a Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Tokyo. His primary research interests lie in democratic representation, comparative welfare states, gender and legislative politics and mixed methods. He holds an MPhil and a DPhil in politics at the University of Oxford and completed a B.A. in public administration from Korea University. His works have appeared or are forthcoming in Democratization, Parliamentary Affairs, Journal of Women, Politics and Policy, and Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy.

KDI School-FU Korea-Europe Programme
Institute of Korean Studies
Freie Univesität Berlin

2020

Abstract:
The primary goal of this paper is to examine how European countries have been perceived by the South Korean media with respect to the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Based on key media outlets in South Korea, the paper examines both the saliency and sentiment of news media coverage on 27 EU countries and the United Kingdom in the first three months of 2020. The result shows that these European countries have been exposed to the Korean media substantially more than in normal times, and that was largely driven by issues related to COVID-19. In addition to the increased saliency, the sentiment analysis demonstrates that the newspaper coverage has largely portrayed key European countries from a negative viewpoint. Although European countries have so far been seen from a positive light by the South Korean public, the negative media depiction of European countries in relation to a highly salient and cross-nationally comparable crisis like COVID-19 pandemic could damage their public perception in the eyes of South Koreans.

I. Introduction

When it comes to understanding relations between countries and their people, public perception cannot be neglected. As often captured by the term "soft power[1]" (Nye, 2004), foreign relations is not merely a function of physical forces and material power, be it military or economic. Outside public perception is crucial for measuring a particular country's soft power and it can even affect day-to-day lives of people living in or interacting with people in that country. Furthermore, research also shows that the perceived nature of the bilateral relationship can affect foreign policy decisions (Herrmann 1985): political elites tend to be concerned with how the public will view their action and often try to justify the legitimacy of their choices on the basis of public preference. In this sense, it is not surprising that more conflictual policies are likely to be set vis-à-vis other countries when the perceived foreign relationship is hostile (Schafer, 1997).

As for the public perception between South Korea (henceforth, Korea) and 28 European countries (27 EU countries and the United Kingdom), as will be detailed later, it has been made clear that the Korean public has held highly positive view on key European countries like France, Germany, or the United Kingdom. By contrast, the European perception of Korea has become more positive over time, reflecting the steady increase in Korea's soft power ranking, moving from 22nd in 2016 to 19th in 2019 (McClory, 2019). Despite largely positive reciprocal public perception between Korea and Europe, the COVID-19 pandemic represents a critical juncture that could change that perception. On the one hand, the latest survey results conducted with Korea experts based in 16 European countries (Cho et al., 2020) clearly show that a large majority of the public in those respective countries would view Korea's pandemic response (specifically the government's extensive testing, innovative technology application, and face mask recommendations) in a positive light; aside from that, they have noted that Korea's exemplary handling of the COVID-19 pandemic will improve the country's public image (ibid.). In view of this and in combination with the latest culmination of the Korean wave – the movie *Parasite* – COVID-19 pandemic management is expected to boost positive public perception of Korea in Europe. On the other hand, almost all European countries have experienced considerably higher COVID-19 infection/death rates than Korea and displayed belated and/or misguided government responses – for instance, regarding the distribution of protective medical equipment, or herd immunity strategies. Given the considerably high levels of global media attention COVID-19 issues receive, it is not unreasonable to postulate that the media can be a conduit through which the Korean public's perception of European countries can be altered.

In an attempt to demonstrate this, the paper investigates how 28 European countries (27 EU countries and the United Kingdom) were portrayed by the Korean media in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic during the first three months of 2020. Specifically, I employ a media content analysis method by examining both the quantity of related news stories and their core sentiments. The following section will introduce existing studies related to the public perception of Korea within European countries and vice versa, and explain the significance of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of its potential to shift hitherto held public perceptions. A description of the specific method employed in the paper and the demonstration of results will follow. The concluding section will summarize the key findings and suggest the potential avenues for future research.

---

[1] Soft power can be defined as "the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction" (Nye, 2004: 1).

II. Korean–European Public Perception and COVID-19

From the perspective of public perception, the relationship between Korea and European countries merits academic scrutiny. For instance, in 2010, Korea became the first Asian country to sign a free trade agreement (FTA) with the European Union, through which most of the tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade were removed. As of 2019 the European Union is the third-largest destination of goods from Korea (in addition to the European Union being the biggest foreign direct investor in Korea), while Korea is the eighth-largest export destination for the European Union[2]. The increased significance of the two parties for each other since the FTA agreement has already been well documented. For instance, cross-national perception research between the European Union and Asian countries notes that Europeans' perception of Korea has changed from "a region of little direct importance" to an "area of economic, political and strategic involvements" (Balme and Bridges, 2008). Similarly, surveys conducted in 2006 and 2009 show a clear pattern of the European Union's growing importance in the eyes of the Korean general public as well as its elites (Chaban and Chung, 2009; Yoon, 2013).

It is one thing to recognize mutual importance but quite another thing to know in what way one's own country is perceived. To that end, the global survey jointly conducted by the BBC, Global Scan, and East Asian Institute in 2014 on 24 countries can serve as the common reference point between Korea and European countries. When Korean respondents were asked for their views on the influence of particular European countries – Germany, the United Kingdom, and France – the results were substantially more positive than negative, with these three countries ranking as the first-, third-, and fourth-most positively perceived countries in the world[3]. Upon examining other surveys that take a deeper look into Korean's perception of European countries, it is clear that Europe is largely perceived as a powerful international actor due to its economic and trading power, whose impact on Korea is often viewed in relation to Euro, car industry, or anti-trust regulations (Chan, 2008). To a certain extent, this resonates with the oft-perceived notion that the European Union is "a trading giant" (Balme and Bridges, 2008; Chan, 2010). However, more importantly, research based on global cases demonstrates that European countries[4] derive their attractiveness from their normative power and its social, developmental, and environmental role (Pardo, 2015; Chaban, 2011). For instance, in news coverage of Europe-related issues and in surveys of public perception, the European Union is strongly associated with healthcare, human rights, culture, education, and travel and leisure (Holland et al., 2007); this largely coincides with public perception surveys conducted in other East Asian countries – such as Taiwan, whose public image of the European Union is comprised of recognition of the welfare state, an advanced education system, cultural contributions, and football (Chan, 2010). These public perceptions are well reflected in one of the most well established annual global soft power rankings – Softpower 30 – whose top 20 countries in the past years consist primarily of European countries (McCloy, 2019).

---

2 Details can be found from the European Commission website (https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/south-korea/)

3 Specifically, the percentage difference between each was as follows: Germany 85 vs. 6; the United Kingdom 78 vs. 6; France 70 vs. 11. This is a clear contrast to the lowest ranking countries like Japan (16 vs. 79) or North Korea (3 vs. 91).

4 Research shows that when people in Korea think of European countries, they largely draw their perception from established Western European democracies (Holland et al., 2007).

In the case of European perception of Korea, the global survey jointly executed by the BBC and Global Scan was conducted not only in 2014 but also in 2010 and 2017, allowing us to examine a change in perception longitudinally over the past decade. Looking at the 2014 survey, an average of 33 per cent of respondents in Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Spain perceived Korea's influence to be positive. The positive percentage is substantially lower than the reciprocal value – on average 77 per cent of Koreans felt positively about Germany, France, and the United Kingdom's influence (Spain was not included in the survey). However, viewed over time, there is clearly an increasing trend in the degree to which Koreans are perceived positively by Europeans, moving from 27 per cent in 2010 to 33 per cent in 2014 to 36 per cent in 2017. This pattern is in line with the steady increase of Korea's soft power ranking, which, by moving up one rank every year, went from 22nd in 2016 to 19th in 2019 (McClory, 2019). On a related note, during the Global Soft Power Summit 2020, Korea is noted as a "middle-power country with super-power cultural cache" that can be characterized by its K-Pop music (for example, BTS), foods (for instance, bibimbap and kimchi), and cinema (most recently the film *Parasite*, which won the Oscar for "Best Picture" at the 2020 Academy Awards).

To sum up, what is clear from the existing research is that key European countries have been enjoying highly positive perception by the Korean public. Although Korea is not perceived positively to a similar degree in European countries, the trend shows that its public perception has been steadily improving over time. However, I posit that the latest COVID-19 pandemic represents a critical juncture for public perception change between European countries and Korea for the following reasons. First, the pandemic hit both Korea and European countries, whose related statistics (death, infection, recovery rate, and so on) have been clearly visible on a day-to-day basis through globally accessible websites such as the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html) or have been communicated to the domestic audience from a cross-national perspective through major media outlets. At the time of writing, Korea has clearly been performing better than European countries in minimizing the damage related to COVID-19 to the extent that it was able to hold a nationwide general election, which saw its highest voter turnout (66.7 per cent) since 1992. Second, unlike other crises such as tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, or hurricanes, the room for human intervention in controlling related damage is much higher for a global pandemic like COVID-19 whose global diffusion has come with a certain time lag. Therefore, how it is managed by the government and people in a specific country could easily become the focus of praise or criticism from an international viewpoint. In this sense, in addition to flattening its infection rate curve, Korea's handling of the outbreak is often positively recognized as a "liberal democratic alternative" to neighboring China's authoritarian approach (This Week in Asia, 2020). Third is the high degree of COVID-19 related media exposure. Insofar as the first few months of 2020 are concerned, research shows that consumption of news coverage – which was largely composed of stories related to COVID-19 around the world – has substantially increased worldwide (J.P. Morgan Research, 2020). Thus, the way in which the Korean media portrays particular European countries in relation to COVID-19 could play a critical role in altering the existing public perception.

III. Media Saliency of COVID-19 in EU Countries

Often noted as the "fourth estate" of government (Rozell and Mayer, 2008), the media can be a powerful tool, as it has the capacity to shape public perception and policy discourse. It can shape people's opinions and identities by showing what issues appear in the public discourse (agenda-setting) and how they are discussed (priming/framing) (Lyengar and Kinder, 2010). The media's influence is particularly pronounced in the international domain because, unlike domestic affairs, the media-consuming public in general have minimal first-hand exposure to international realities. Additionally, the media is known for drawing cognitive maps of the world beyond our direct experience (McCombs, 2018). Reciprocal public perception between 28 European countries and Korea fits this description, given the lack of strong historical/political/ cultural ties and large emigrant/immigrant numbers between the two parties. Reflecting this, related survey results show that an overwhelming proportion of the Korean public seek information on the EU through media outlets (Holland et al., 2007); even at the elite level, respondents with personal or professional contacts with European states in general are few and far between.

To examine how 28 European countries have been depicted by the Korean media in relation to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, I utilized the comprehensive search engine "Big Kinds" (https://www.bigkinds.or.kr/), which covers a wide variety of Korean media outlets, including 11 key national and 24 local-level newspapers and 10 further specialized business and online newspapers; the coverage can be deemed exhaustive since the search engine archives all published newspaper articles from each newspaper. More importantly, previous research shows that newspapers are the second most widely used source for Koreans to access news on European countries (trailed by a small margin to TV), and this tendency was particularly pronounced among Korean elites (Chaban and Holland, 2008; Yoon et al., 2010).

As for the keyword searching method, I included each of the 28 European countries using their "country name" in combination with the word "virus OR Corona OR COVID." The search was conducted in Korean, and the specific search boundary was confined to 1 January to 7 April 2020, when the first round of data collection ended. All 28 European countries combined, the search result returned a monthly average of 21,933 newspaper articles. To gauge the overall media saliency of newspaper articles related to COVID-19, I examined the monthly average of all newspaper articles related to 28 European countries without combining this with COVID-19 keywords. Considering that the result was 41,341 newspaper articles per month on average, it can be said that the COVID-19 issues had a very high media saliency – 53 per cent of the total – for 28 European countries during the period of observation (Figure 1, right). In an attempt to compare the observed media saliency from a longitudinal perspective, I examined to what extent the 28 European countries had been covered prior to 2020. From 1990 to 2019, the 28 EU countries were covered by an average of 19,793 newspaper articles per month. This is only half of the average monthly coverage for the primary period of observation chosen for this analysis and indicates that the latest media saliency surge with respect to 28 European countries in the Korean media has been driven by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 1

Media Saliency of 28 European Countries in Korea

(average article number per month)
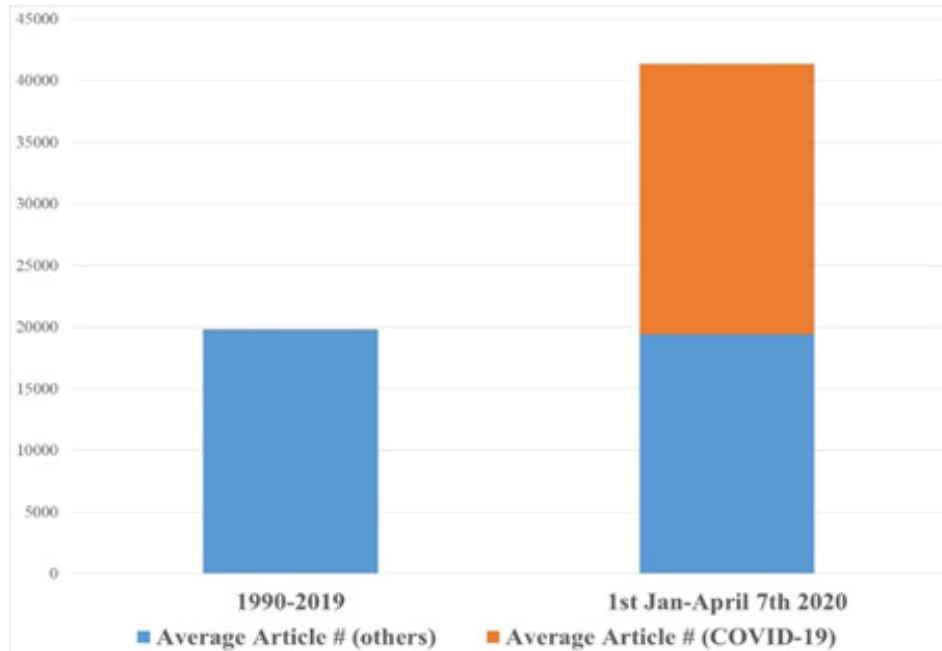
The media studies literature has noted the importance of distinguishing "news prominence" from simple "news presence" (Trimble, 2007; Wagner, 2014). If the latter simply focuses on the presence of a particular subject in the news, the former can be distinguished by different levels of media attention that the entity receives. In relation to this, research shows that an entity of interest appearing in a headline or in a photograph is substantially more likely to be noticed by readers than one that appears only in the story's text (Holmqvist and Wartenberg, 2006). Seen from this light, European countries whose names were included in the newspaper headline along with the COVID-19 keywords are bound to be more salient in the view of the Korean public, these articles thus having a higher chance of shaping Korean perceptions of those countries. Altogether, 2,729 newspaper articles fall into this category (4.14 per cent of the total). In addition to its high visibility, I chose the newspaper headline as the point of further analysis in this paper for the following three reasons: First, the search engine database employed for this paper separates newspaper headlines from the main text. Second, the total number 2,729 lends itself to a careful hand-coding of the whole universe. Third, there is less of a chance the selected newspaper article represents a "false positive." For instance, simultaneous appearance of a COVID-19 keyword and a country's name does not necessarily mean that the name actually indicates the country of interest or that the country of interest is described in the newspaper in relation to the COVID-19 issue directly. "Relevance between keywords" becomes particularly problematic for keywords appearing in parts of an article other than the headline, as they are more likely to be distant from each other and/or appear in different sentences. However, if keywords appear together in the headline they are highly likely to relate to each other in a direct way since they tend to appear in the form of a single sentence.

And, in fact, the selected article headlines were mostly about 28 European countries with respect to the latest COVID-19 pandemic in this paper – 93.6 per cent of the total. That is, by reading through each of the headlines, I was able to remove those newspaper articles which were not concerned with depicting the selected country (despite having the selected country's name) or depicting the selected country secondarily, with reference to another country that was at the center of headline – 0.9 and 5.5 per cent for each category, respectively.[5] This manual winnowing led to the removal of 6.4 per cent of irrelevant excerpts, resulting in 2,553 articles in the end.

IV. Media Depiction of COVID-19 in European Countries

Having demonstrated the increased media saliency of European countries within the COVID-19 context, this section will investigate how each newspaper article depicted the corresponding European country by examining the primary sentiment, positive or negative. As pointed out earlier, the assumption here is that the more a newspaper article portrays a particular European country from a positive/negative light, the better/worse public perception will be. All 2,553 newspaper article headlines were hand-coded and, to maximize intra-coder reliability, the order of the newspapers was randomized prior to the coding.[6] How one categorizes a newspaper article as positive or negative is inherently subjective. One clear shortcoming of media-content based public perception research conducted with East Asian countries so far has been a lack of specification of how the author defined "positive" or "negative" media contents (e.g. Yoon et al., 2010; Su and Yeh, 2018, Yoon, 2013). In an attempt to address this shortcoming, the paper conducted coding in the framework of the five categories below, which were pre-identified with a random sample coding of 100 newspaper articles; these categories are derived with reference to the COVID-19 crisis in the Korean context.

State of COVID-19 infection/death: If the newspaper headline primarily concerns the state of COVID-19 deaths or infections in the corresponding European country by pointing out the spread of the virus or the large number of affected people, it is coded as "negative"; by contrast, if the headline is about the blocking/slowing of the spread or the low number of affected people, it is coded as "positive."

Attitude towards Koreans/Asians: If the newspaper headline is mainly about COVID-19–related incidents showing the corresponding European country's negative attitudes towards East Asians in general or Koreans in particular, it is coded as "negative"; by contrast, if it relates to a friendly cooperation with or describes a direct compliment to Korea-related entities (for instance, firms, government, general public), it is coded as "positive."

---

[5] Examples of irrelevant articles with European country names include the articles on "Petit France in Gapyeong", "Herb Island in Pochun" (Ireland and island are written the same in Korean), or "Northern Ireland's Infection Cases". As for the cases of secondary reference, the country of interest is not included in the headline as the primary subject, such as "Korean foreign minister finished her UK visit in the midst of Corona crisis."
[6] The analysis lacks an inter-coder reliability check at this stage.

Government competence/determination/judgement: If the newspaper headline primarily concerns policy measures related to the corresponding European country's incompetence or poor judgement in handling COVID-19, it is coded as "negative"; by contrast, if it relates to the competence, good judgement, or strong determination of the government, it is coded as "positive."

Societal competence/determination/resilience: Beyond government, actors such as firms, individuals, universities, or the media can also play a critical role in shaping public perception of foreign countries. Bearing this in mind, if the newspaper headline primarily concerns non-governmental actors' ill-intentioned initiatives, incompetence, or negligence related to the corresponding European country's COVID-19 situation, it is coded as "negative"; by contrast, if it relates to positive initiatives, strong determination, or resilience it is coded as "positive."

Macro-level consequence of COVID-19: If the newspaper headline primarily describes the negative societal consequence of COVID-19, it is coded as "negative"; by contrast, if it concerns the positive societal consequence it is coded as "positive."

In some instances, newspaper headlines include both negative and positive content. If dual sentiments were also evenly reflected in the article text, I coded it as "both positive and negative," but only as one category if the article text reflected one sentiment. Similarly, for articles whose sentiment was not self-explanatory from their headlines, I read the whole article text to determine the primary sentiment. If the primary sentiment of the corresponding article was still not clear, it was coded as "non/neutral." Therefore, each newspaper article is coded per a four-fold distinction in this paper: non/neutral (0), negative (1), positive (2), negative and positive (3); the distribution of the results is shown below.

Figure 2
Media Sentiment of EU Countries on COVID-19 Pandemic (all categories)
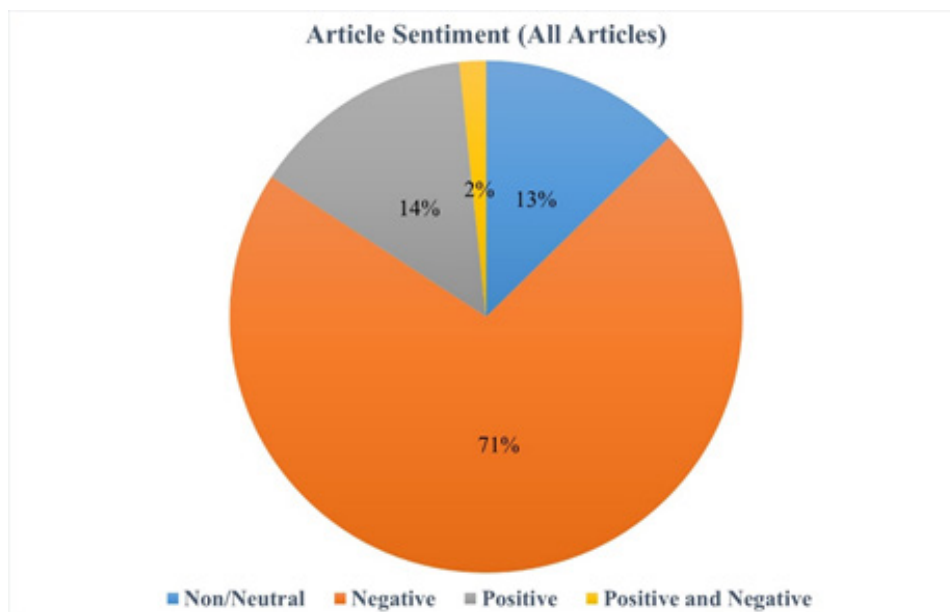
As made clear by Figure 2, the result shows Korean media's overall negative perception of 28 European countries pertinent to the COVID-19 pandemic. Namely, 360 positive newspaper articles (14.1 per cent) were clearly dwarfed by 1,827 newspaper articles (71.5 per cent) that shed a negative light on the countries; the other two categories accounted for less than 15 per cent in total – the non/neutral category comprising 12.65 per cent with 325 articles, while the positive-and-negative category consisted of merely 1.68 per cent, with 43 articles. For the five key European countries with which Korea has the closest trade/personal ties, the Korean media dedicated a significantly higher proportion of the total newspaper articles – Italy (35.96 per cent), the United Kingdom (14.61 per cent), Spain (14.53 per cent), France (12.06 per cent), and Germany (9.13 per cent)[7]. Yet, the dominant sentiment was "negative" in any country, ranging from 61.8 per cent in Germany to 79.78 per cent in Spain.

If we look at the key reason behind the negative perception, it is clear that the newspapers reporting "the state of COVID-19 infection or death in 28 European countries" is the primary driving force. Of all newspaper articles, 63.02 per cent fall into this specific category; and for this category, the dominant sentiment was negative, taking up 93.34 per cent. Specifically, the key themes concerning the state of COVID-19 infection or death demonstrate the six patterns detailed below.

The first pattern related to a country's state of COVID-19 infections or death vis-à-vis other countries. Sometimes, the reference category was set as the country with the highest COVID-19 infections/deaths at the time of the article's publication, whereby the article often pointed out that the country of interest went beyond that number. Other times, the state of European country's COVID-19 infection or death rate was reported with reference to China or Korea. Second, when a COVID-19 infection or death concerned prominent figures in a particular European country – for instance, prime ministers, royal families, or renowned athletes or musicians – this tended to hit the newspaper headline. The third type of article concerns when a country saw its first COVID-19 infection or death. Oftentimes, the "first" was linked to particular social groups, such as "first COVID-19 child death" or "first royal family death." A fourth category of article covered specific European countries when they reached particularly salient round numbers in their infection or death rates (1,000 deaths, 10,000 infections, and so on). Fifth, in some cases, the media-worthiness was derived from the degree to which a particular country experienced an increasing rate or rising numbers of COVID-19 infections or deaths within a given time period – for example, "the death rate doubled in a week" or "the number of infected increased by 5,000 in a day." A sixth type of article included a particular European country in the headline when a person infected with COVID-19 in Korea was directly connected to that country – for example, a person returning to Korea from Germany turned out to be COVID-19 positive.

In my view, the first two reporting patterns related to "the state of COVID-19 infection or death" category mainly highlight the commercial logic behind the media operations in Korea. In media studies, it has been noted that substantial issues crucial to the public get sensationalized and dramatized (Lyengar and McGrady 2007) to boost the market value of the news and attract consumers. Insofar as the first two reporting types are concerned, the state of COVID-19 infections or deaths in European countries was reported in the Korean media similar to its depiction of key elections which highly resembles horse races, rivalry, and scandals between candidates; and this clearly fits the media commercialization logic.

---

[7] Five countries with the least media coverage related to COVID-19 were Cyprus (0 per cent), Latvia (0 per cent), Portugal (0 per cent), Malta (0.04 percent), and Luxembourg (0.12 per cent).

The last four reporting patterns largely come across as non-sensualized matter-of-fact style. However, written from a commercialization logic or not, all six reporting patterns could create a negative association in Korean people's minds that the corresponding European country was not safe. Moreover, substantial infection rate and the high number of fatalities could indirectly point to the governments' incompetence or negligence in described European countries when contrasted to the Korean record.

Figure 3
Media Sentiment of EU Countries on COVID-19 Pandemic
(infection/death rate category excluded)
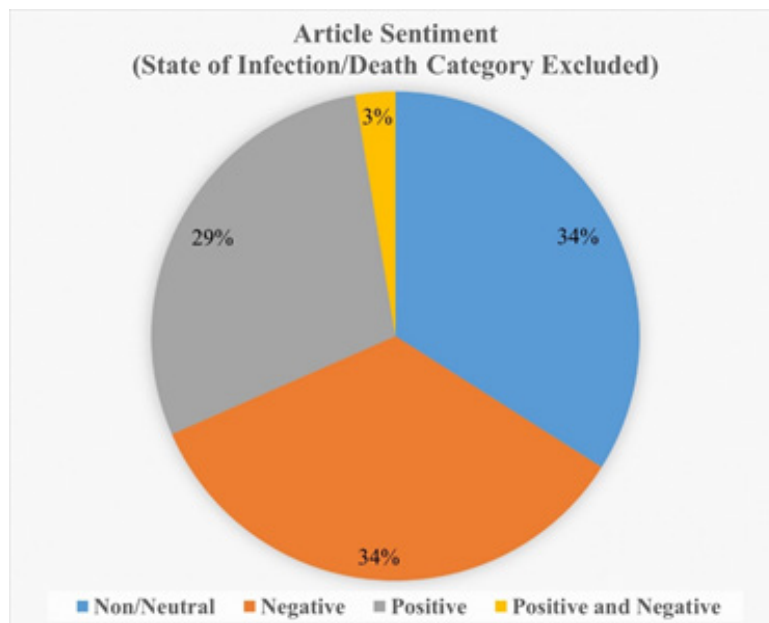
If the "state of COVID-19 infection/death" category were removed, would there be any substantial shift in the media sentiment? Figure 3 shows the distribution of media sentiment based on the remaining four categories. The proportion of "negative" is reduced quite substantially but is still the most frequent sentiment, accounting for 34.42 per cent, followed by 34 per cent in the "non/neutral" and 28.91 per cent in the "positive" categories. Judging by this, even after removing the dominant category which appears to be influenced by media's commercial logic, the media depiction of European countries in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic does not fare particularly well.

Specifically, as made clear by the examples included in Table 1, several noteworthy patterns can be observed in the Korean media's depiction of 28 European countries that are germane to the COVID-19 pandemic. First, as for the attitude towards Koreans/Asians, negative examples predominantly consist of racist remarks or incidents in the corresponding country; here, I expanded the target of racism from Koreans to East Asians in general[8]. By contrast, positive examples tend to include the corresponding country (or related firms) showing good intentions towards Korea by donating money, purchasing Korean-manufactured medical equipment, or removing Korea from a COVID-19 blacklist. Moreover, a large number of articles report on political leaders of the corresponding countries wanting to learn from Korea's crisis management. Second, when it comes to the government response category, the coding primarily hinged on how the government is treating the weak and marginalized or how widely testing has been made accessible. On the one hand, numerous articles reported that several European countries experienced serious shortages in their testing ability and/or left the old and weak abandoned. On the other hand, some articles feature how particular European countries are outspending Korea to protect the weak, referring largely to the unemployed, tenants, or crisis-hit firms.

Third, in the case of societal response, numerous negative newspaper articles feature theft, hoarding, or price surges of staples and key protective medical supplies in European countries. Moreover, several newspaper articles depicted the negligent or irresponsible behavior of a given European country's public or of given European nationals residing in Korea. The newspaper articles in this category evincing a positive sentiment largely consist of cases where specific individuals or institutions lent a helping hand – for instance, universities or other research institutions reporting research breakthroughs or sharing important research results. Besides, the category also included numerous heartwarming examples of the public's resilience in the face of COVID-19–induced illness or a lockdown. In the case of the fifth category, concerning the macro level consequence of COVID-19, the negative articles were mainly about the dire economic consequences COVID-19 will bring/has brought, while the positive ones concerned some unintended consequences of lockdowns, for example that the crime rate has decreased or the environment has improved.

---

8 This decision is based on my observation of how online newspaper readers reacted to the related newspaper articles in the "article comment" section.

Table 1

Media Examples of EU Countries on COVID-19 Pandemic

	Negative	Positive
Attitude towards Koreans/Asians	Racist graffiti at sushi restaurant (France); Journalist denigrating COVID-19 victims in China as "Pokemon" (France); Violent incidents towards Asians (Italy); Asian students forbidden from attending classes (Italy); An actress removing Chinese tenant (Germany); Toilet-usage restriction for Korean passengers on the national carrier (Netherlands)	Donation to Korea by firms or embassies (Germany, Netherlands); Positive evaluation of Korea's COVID-19 response (Germany); Removing Korea from list of countries blacklisted due to COVID-19 (Czech Republic); Leader's request to share Korea's COVID-19 response (France, Spain); Translating and making Korea's COVID-19 response the key guideline (Romania); Purchasing medical equipment from Korean firms (Italy)
Government competence/ determination/ judgement	Difficulty of receiving COVID-19 testing (France, United Kingdom); Herd immunity strategy is a dangerous gamble (Sweden); Deprioritizing the elderly for testing/cure (Italy); Leader's power abuse and democratic backsliding (Hungary)	Substantially higher COVID-19 expenditure to protect jobs (Germany); Protecting tenants from evictions (United Kingdom); Repatriating nationals from countries hit by COVID-19 (France); High public satisfaction rate on government's handling of COVID-19 (Germany)
Societal competence/ determination/ resilience	A theft of 50,000 masks (Germany); Sudden price surge of masks and disinfectants (Italy); Massive hoarding of staples (Italy); Riots in prisons due to visitation restrictions (Italy); Unhygienic and negligent public (France, Italy); Misbehavior of COVID-19 infected foreign nationals residing in Korea (Poland, United Kingdom); Exodus of Korean nationals from the European country in which they resided (Italy)	Reporting important COVID-19 related research results/break-throughs by universities/firms (United Kingdom, Germany, Italy); Taking foreign national patients to treat in own country (Germany); Prime minister engaging in COVID-19 volunteer work (Ireland); Dancing on balcony every night (Italy); Donation by celebrities (Spain, Italy); Misreporting of COVID-19 death in Korea (Spain); A centenarian COVID-19 patient to be discharged from the hospital (Italy)
Macro-level consequence of COVID-19	Rapid drop in the Business Climate Index (Germany); COVID-19 induced closure of Korean firms (Italy)	Decreasing crime rate (Italy); Improving environment (Italy)

V. Concluding Remarks

The primary goal of this paper is to examine how European countries have been perceived by the Korean media with respect to the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Based on key media outlets in Korea, the paper has examined both the saliency and sentiment of news media coverage on 28 European countries in the first three months of 2020. The result shows that European countries have been exposed to the Korean media substantially more than in normal times, and that was largely driven by issues related to COVID-19. In addition to the increased saliency, the sentiment analysis demonstrates that roughly 80 per cent of the newspaper coverage has portrayed European countries from a negative viewpoint. Upon closer examination, newspapers depicting the state of COVID-19 infection or death in 28 European countries was the dominant contributing factor to the coverage's negativity. Other types of noteworthy negative portrayals related to the COVID-19 pandemic include incidents or remarks revealing unfavorable attitudes towards Koreans/Asians, the state of government incompetence, poor judgement, indecisiveness, and negligence or irresponsiveness at the societal level.

All in all, in combination with the latest survey results conducted on the European perception of Korea (Cho et al., 2020), I submit that the COVID-19 pandemic can be a critical juncture in the reciprocal public perception of Korea and European countries. On the one hand, Europeans' positive perception of Korea – which has been gradually increasing over the past decade – will see a further boost owing to the Korea's largely successful management of the COVID-19 pandemic. So far, Korea has drawn positive attention from foreign nationalities based on its entertainment and culture sector, the Korean wave. In addition to this, the fact that Korea is recognized as a model case in coping with a globally relevant pandemic like COVID-19 is bound to shed a positive light on the Korean government's hitherto underappreciated transparency and responsiveness—key criteria in measuring the annual soft power index (e.g. McClory, 2018). Taking advantage of this national image windfall, the Korean government has been actively trying to turn the COVID-19 crisis into an opportunity to promote the national status, and even dubbed its pandemic containment strategy as "K-Quarantine" model (KBS World, 2020). On the other hand, although the latest cross-national survey conducted in 2014 demonstrates that key European countries have been seen from an overwhelmingly positive light by the Korean public, the largely negative media depiction of European countries in relation to a highly salient and cross-nationally comparable crisis like COVID-19 could damage public perception of those countries in the eyes of Koreans. In other words, COVID-19 could rub salt into the wound on the Korean perception of European countries, which has already suffered in the past few years due to opinions in Korea on the migration crisis, rise of populist leaders, and Brexit (Su and Yeh, 2018; Chang and Pieke, 2018)[9].

---

9 Echoing this, the latest public perception survey conducted in the midst of COVID-19 (jointly by the Seoul National University, Sisa IN, and KBS between 7th and 8th May 2020) shows that there are substantially more Koreans who believe Korea has better "state capacity" than developed countries (39.2 percent, compared to 25.4 percent who believe developed countries are better) as well as "civil capacity (58.2 percent, compared to 14.1 percent who believe developed countries are better).

Before closing, I want to acknowledge several limitations of this paper and, based on that, suggest several potential avenues for future research. First, the period of observation for this paper is roughly the first three months of this year, and that is not sufficient to draw a conclusion. That is, we should keep in mind that the COVID-19 pandemic is an ongoing event even at the time of writing, and it is too soon to tell whether and how public perception will shift. On the Korean perception side, considering that April and May 2020 saw a huge surge of infections in the Americas – particularly in the United States and Brazil – there is a chance that the Korean media's negative media perception of European countries gradually became overshadowed. In the case of European perception of Korea, a new example to be considered, among others, is a sudden increase of new infections originating in nightclubs located in a district of Seoul known for its gay scene, which occurred after the period of observation selected for this analysis. This event drew negative media attention not only because it has shown the perils of relaxing restrictions too soon but also because it has sparked an outpouring of hate speech in Korea towards the LGBTQ population. All things considered, future research should complement these shortcomings by extending both the number of key COVID-19 hit countries beyond Europe and the time frame to at least May or June 2020, when many European countries managed to flatten the infection curve and relaxed COVID-19–related restrictions. Second, by relying on "old" media outlets, the analysis conducted here did not include "new" media such as Facebook, Kakao Story, YouTube, Twitter, or Instagram. Given the fact that Korea is one of the most connected countries in the world and that younger generations rely heavily on new media, future research should investigate to what extent new media mirrors the key findings unearthed in this paper to get a fuller sense of the public perception.

References

Balme, Richard, and Brian Bridges. (2008). Europe-Asia relations: building multilateralisms. Springer.

Chaban, Natalia. (2011). The EU's imagery as a social, developmental and environmental actor in Asia. EU External Affairs Review, 5-23.

Chaban, Natalia, and Sae Won Chung (2009). Public Perceptions of the EU in South Korea: Longitudinal Study (2004-2006). Asia-Pacific Journal of EU Studies, 7(1), 19-39.

Chaban, Natalia, and Martin Holland (Eds.). (2008). The European Union and the Asia-Pacific: media, public and elite perceptions of the EU. Routledge.

Chan, Kenneth Ka-Lok. (2008). Bringing public opinion back in: Public perceptions of the EU in Thailand and South Korea. In The European Union and the Asia-Pacific (pp. 138-160). Routledge.

Chan, Kenneth Ka-Lok. (2010). Images, visibility and the prospects of soft power of the EU in Asia: the case of China. Asia Europe Journal, 8(2), 133-147.

Chang, Vincent, and Frank Pieke (2018). Europe's engagement with China: shifting Chinese views of the EU and the EU-China relationship. Asia Europe Journal, 16(4), 317-331.

Cho, Seo-Young., Eric Ballbach, Daniela Clauss-Kim, Hyun Gyung Kim, Eun-Jeung Lee, Jaemin Shim (2020). South Korea's Soft Power in the Era of the Covid-19 Pandemic – An Analysis of the Expert Survey in Europe. Korea Focus Working Paper Series (1).

Herrmann, Richard. (1985). Perceptions and behavior in Soviet foreign policy. University of Pittsburgh Pre.

Holland, Martin, Peter Ryan, Alojzy Nowak & Natalia Chaban (2007). The EU through the eyes of Asia: media, public and elite perceptions in China, Japan. Korea, Singapore and Thailand, Singapore: Asia-Europe Foundation.

Holmqvist, Kenneth, and Constanze Wartenberg (2005). The role of local design factors for newspaper reading behaviour–an eye-tracking perspective. Lund University Cognitive Studies, 127: 1-21.

J.P. Morgan Research. (2020). Media Consumption in the Age of COVID-19.

KBS World. (2020). S. Korea to Utilize ‚K-Quarantine' Model to Enhance Economic Cooperation

Lyengar, Shanto, and Jennifer McGrady. (2007). Media politics: A citizen's guide. New York: WW Norton.

Lyengar, Shanto, and Donald Kinder. (2010). News that matters: Television and American opinion. University of Chicago Press.

McClory, Jonathan (2018). Global Ranking of Soft Power.

McCombs, Maxwell. (2018). Setting the agenda: Mass media and public opinion. John Wiley & Sons.

Nye Jr, Joseph. (2004). Soft power: The means to success in world politics. Public affairs.

Pardo, Sharon. (2015). Normative power Europe meets Israel: perceptions and realities. Lexington Books.

Rozell, Mark J., and Jeremy D. Mayer. (Eds.). (2008). Media power, media politics. Rowman & Littlefield.

Schafer, Mark. (1997). Images and policy preferences. Political Psychology, 18(4), 813-829.

Su, Hungdah, and Kuo-chun Yeh. (2018). Asian perception of the EU after Brexit: the case of Taiwan. Asia Europe Journal, 16(4), 395-421.

This Week in Asia. (2020). South Korea's coronavirus response is the opposite of China and Italy – and it's working.

Trimble, Linda (2007). "Gender, Political Leadership and Media Visibility: Globe and Mail Coverage of Conservative Party of Canada Leadership Contests." Canadian Journal of Political Science. 40 (4): 969–9

Wagner, Angelia. 2014. "Women Municipal Politicians in Election News." Communication Papers 3:35–48.

Yoon, Sung Won, Chadan, N., & Chung, S. W. (2010). ,Trading Giant'and'Economic Powerhouse'?: Images of the EU in Korean Television News. The Journal of Contemporary European Studies (*yuleob-yeongu*), 28(3), 283-329.

Yoon, Sung Won. (2013). EU-Korea at 50: main issues, perceptions and prospects. Korea Journal of EU Studies (*EUyeongu*), (35), 3-48.