Presidents’ visual presentations in their official photos: A cross-cultural analysis of the US and South Korea

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Abstract: While the ways heads of states are visually portrayed in their official photos may differ depending on their cultures, particularly whether they have an individualistic culture or a collectivistic culture, little scholarly attention has been paid to examining such differences. The present study investigates how US and South Korean presidents, Barack Obama and Myung-bak Lee, strategically presented themselves during their first year of presidency. Analysis of White House and Blue House photos ($N = 467$) reveals significant differences between the individualistic country (US) and the collectivistic country (South Korea). While the US uses a variety of techniques to frame Obama as a compassionate family man supported by ordinary citizens, South Korea relies heavily on the statesmanship frame to portray Lee as a world-class leader. Overall, the two administrations had different approaches to photos: one as storytelling, and the other as a ritual.

Subjects: Political Communication; Political Leaders; Politics & the Media; Public Relations; Visual Communication

Keywords: photograph; visual; presentation; framing; individualism; collectivism; cross-cultural; president

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

While it is widely known that photographs are important in politicians’ image-making, and the ways political leaders are visually presented in their official photographs may differ depending on their cultures, scholars have paid little attention to examining such differences. The present study explores how differently US and South Korean presidents, Barack Obama and Myung-bak Lee, are strategically presented during their first year of presidency. Analysis of White House and Blue House photos reveals significant differences between the individualistic country and the collectivistic country. While the US uses a variety of techniques to frame Obama as a compassionate family man supported by ordinary citizens, South Korea relies heavily on the statesmanship frame to portray Lee as a world-class leader. Overall, the two administrations had different approaches to photos: one as storytelling, and the other as a ritual. The findings indicate the two different cultures’ different approaches to photographs and visual communication.
1. Introduction
In recent decades, the format of communication has evolved rapidly from textual to visual (Marland, 2012; Mitchell, Gottfried, & Matsa, 2015). As more people consume news and political information through the Internet and social media, which generally give more advantage to visuals than to traditional text-based messages, one impressive picture of a politician can have a stronger influence on the public than a long statement. For instance, a photo of US President Barack Obama embracing his wife Michelle after he was declared the winner of the 2012 presidential election, combined with the words “Four more years,” set new records as the most-liked and most-retweeted post in social media history (Harding, 2012). According to Walter (2012), “a picture really is a thousand words” as new media users increasingly shorten words or communicate using only visuals.

While it is widely known that visual portrayals of politicians in photos are extremely important in their image-making, surprisingly little attention has been paid to examining presidents’ visual images. Existing literature focuses mainly on how political candidates are visually framed by the news media rather than how they strategically present themselves through the photos they release. Even fewer studies have examined incumbent presidents’ visual self-presentations during their presidencies, let alone cross-culturally, although such a study could provide a valuable insight into the role of culture in visual framing.

The present study aims to fill in such gaps in literature by adopting a cross-cultural approach and comparing presidential photos taken and released by the US and South Korean governments. Although both are democratic countries with full-fledged presidential systems, the countries’ uses of photos in presenting their respective presidents are likely to differ because of differences in culture and political context. Using comprehensive visual content analysis of the two presidents’ first-year photos (N = 467), the present study investigates main differences between the US and South Korea’s approaches to presidents’ photos that might stem from the cultural and political differences.

2. Literature review

2.1. Visual primacy effect and visual framing
Image is powerful. It imposes meaning at one stroke without the need to analyze it (Mirzoeff, 1999). Research has found that visuals are more effective than text in gaining the viewer’s attention (Brantner, Lobinger, & Wetzstein, 2011; Bucher & Schumacher, 2006), translating a complex message into a form that is immediately accessible by most people (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007; Perlmutter, 1998; Sulkin & Swigger, 2008), connoting or increasing the viewer’s emotional responses (Bucher & Schumacher, 2006), and forming a parasocial relationship between the viewer and the subject in the image (Bernhard & Scharf, 2008). Visual information is also perceived, activated, and retrieved from memory more readily than verbal information (Bucher & Schumacher, 2006). Because of its higher accessibility than text at the forefront of one’s mind, visual information exerts disproportionally strong influences on impression and judgment (Gibson & Zillmann, 2000). When there is a mismatch between visual and verbal messages, viewers tend to rely more heavily on the former, and the visual information is remembered long after words have been forgotten (Patterson, Churchill, Burger, & Powell, 1992). This picture superiority effect, or “visual primacy effect,” has been widely supported in research (Paivio & Csapo, 1973).

Because of the visual primacy effect, photos play an integral role in the public’s forming impressions of politicians. Visual framing of political candidates during campaigns and debates has been among the most popularly studied topics at the intersection of political and visual communication. Applying Entman’s (2004) notion of framing to images, Brantner et al. (2011) defined visual framing as “the selection of some aspects of the perceived reality and their accentuation in such a way to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation by visual stimuli” (p. 525). The way in which politicians are portrayed influences voters’ perceptions and behaviors such as voting (Nimmo, 1995; Rosenberg, Bohan, McCafferty, & Harris, 1986). Research has found that readers prefer political candidates with a more favorable
image than an unfavorable image even when the written article attached to the image is the same (Barrett & Barrington, 2005). As Marchand (1985) put it, “a picture can say things that no advertiser could say in words” (p. 236).

2.2. Visual semiotics and character framing

Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (1996) offers inventories of the major compositional structures that are established as conventions in visual semiotics, and those visual signs produce meaning in terms of how an image is perceived. According to the theory, small details like the postures and gestures a subject makes in a photo are important in the narrative of the visual story (e.g. whether the subject is superordinate vs. subordinate; or intimate vs. authoritative). An active behavior of doing something to others in an asymmetrical positioning signals that the actor is a leader rather followed by others. The distance at which a subject is placed from the camera (i.e. long, medium, or close-up) indicates social distance between the subject and the viewer. Camera angle (e.g. even, high, or low angle) is used to show their interpersonal relationship; a close-up engages the viewer more intimately than a long shot and a low angle gives visual authority while a high angle creates the impression of a humble and modest character. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), information value of a subject also differs depending on where he or she is placed in an image. The top portion of an image represents the future while the bottom represents the past. Information on the left side represents what is already known, while right-side information represents what is newly coming and, therefore, requires special attention. The degree to which a subject is getting attention in the photo (saliency) can also influence how important, powerful, and respected he or she is perceived. Studies have found that viewers perceive a politician more credible when he or she is captured in a candid picture without posing for the camera or in a profile picture than in a staged picture or in a regular headshot (Baggaley & Duck, 1976). Showing a subject’s back to the camera signals vulnerability but it also implies a trust in the viewer. Based on the semiotics, Goodnow (2010) found that Obama was found to be more favorably framed than Hillary Clinton in The New York Times’s photo essay when the two were competing for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination; In the photos, Clinton looked aloof, passive, and less popular as she appeared with fewer, inattentive supporters in photos with stopped, less intimate motions compared to Obama who was portrayed as a more active and engaging candidate surrounded by enthusiastic supporters.

Grabe and Bucy (2011) suggest that political candidates’ characters can be visually framed as one of three major figures by news media: the ideal candidate (with statesmanship and compassion), the populist campaigner (with mass appeal and ordinariness), or the sure loser. For elected presidents’ self-portrayals, only the first two will be relevant. First, an ideal candidate is assumed by voters to have statesmanship and compassion. Visual manifestations of statesmanship signal “the presidency, projecting, power, authority, control and active leadership” (Grabe & Bucy, 2009, p. 102). Associational juxtaposition of a candidate and patriotic symbols such as a national flag is an effective way to frame the statesmanship as the symbolic meaning of the flag transfers to the candidate (Messaris, Eckman, & Gumpert, 1979). Having formal and dignified attire (e.g. suit and tie) and appearing with high-ranking peers also suggest high statesmanship as well as perceived expertise and leadership abilities (Rodgers, Kenix, & Thorson, 2007). The second frame, compassion, can be built through candidates’ displays of affection toward children and families (Grabe & Bucy, 2011). Embracing a supporter’s baby or appearing alongside their own children and grandchildren can help candidates look warm and benevolent (Erickson, 2000) while indicating that they are family-friendly parental figures who can protect a nation (Nimmo & Combs, 1982).

While the ideal candidate narratives strengthen the greatness of candidates, populist narratives are based on the notion that noble but humble ordinary people understand the needs of the people and stand against self-serving elites (Grabe & Bucy, 2011; Kazin, 1995). The populist frame is found in candid images that present a candidate as one of them (Kazin, 1995), surrounded and applauded by ordinary citizens (Erikson, 2001). Visual depiction of mass appeal is one of the common means to connote the populist frame. Reaction shots of large, enthusiastic crowds make a politician appear popular and acceptable (Duck & Baggaley, 1975). Ordinariness is visually cued when candidates
appear with regular folks, display physical labor or athletic ability, and appear in casual clothes or with rolled-up sleeves (Grabe & Bucy, 2011). Populist framing establishes empathy with common people and, therefore, increases likability.

### 2.3. Strategic visual self-presentation in politics

Visual framing mainly has been studied in the context of news photos and videos. With the rise of digital and social media, however, politicians no longer need to rely on the traditional news media or “gatekeepers” to frame their images (Lee & Lim, 2014). Instead, they work with professional image handlers to plan, produce, select, and distribute favorable photos and video through Internet, email, and social media channels to use the power of visual media to their advantage. According to Goffman (1959), the “presentation of self in everyday life” involves attempts to control or guide the impression that others might make of a person by selectively presenting his or her setting, appearance, and manner as if he or she were an actor wearing a costume and using props on stage while being observed by an audience. Like a professional actor, a social actor has the ability to choose his or her stage, props, and costume. Political candidates attempt to visually frame themselves in a way that promotes their strengths and compensates for perceived weaknesses (Lee, 2013). It is observed that many political candidates utilize known visual framing effects such as appearing with family members or children benefits candidates (Nimmo & Combs, 1982) while formal suit and tie cue leadership abilities (Rodgers et al., 2007).

Such visual self-presentation strategies can also apply to incumbent presidents. Although presidents tend to spend more time indoor and less time interacting with the public, they can still use visual framing in their photos and selectively present their most favorably framed images. Presidents’ offices try to help them manage good impressions both domestically and internationally. It is said that PR professionals even “visualize things that are not in themselves visual such as personality traits or leadership potential” by strategically composing and releasing photos (German, 2010; Mirzoeff, 1999). Marland (2012) points out that the iconic photo depicting Obama and senior members of his administration as they watched the take-down of Osama bin Laden in the White House Situation Room in 2011 had gone through several meticulous steps. First, the photo was taken by a White House photographer, then selected by PR staff, then digitally altered, and finally posted on the White House website. The White House releases a “Photo of the Day” each day to help portray Obama and his administration in a favorable light and promote his activities. News organizations are becoming more susceptible to reproducing packaged visuals of politicians (Marland, 2012).

### 2.4. Cross-cultural differences

Any form of communication is a cultural construction (Hardt, Brennen, Killmeier, 2000). Visual communication is no exception. Studies have found that the US differs from countries such as Israel, India, Japan, and Taiwan in the use of visuals in news and political advertising (Cutler, Javalgi, & Erramilli, 1992; Griffin, Viswanath, & Schwartz, 1994; Javalgi, Cutler, & Malhotra, 1995; Lee, Ryan, Wanta, & Chang, 2004). As Griffin and Kagan (1996) argue, a comparative analysis of two different countries “provides an opportunity to gauge the relative potential for cultural references and visualizations in different cultural context” (p. 46).

South Korea, or the Republic of Korea, is a developed country that has grown rapidly since the 1960s. Located in East Asia, the OECD country has the world’s 11th largest economy and is the 9th largest country in terms of international trade. The country boasts a long history that traces back to 2,333 BC, but its history of democracy is relatively short. After a series of military coups and dictatorships following the Korean War and ensuing North and South division (see Ringen, Kwon, Yi, Kim, & Lee, 2011), the nation held its first direct election in 1987 by popular vote. The citizens elected a military general who was supported by a former dictator. In 1993, South Korea elected its first civilian president.

With its strong Confucian traditions, East Asian countries, including South Korea, are known for their collectivistic culture as opposed to Western individualistic culture. In individualistic societies,
according to Hofstede (1991), individuals are expected to look after themselves and their immediate family, but are not responsible for other members of society. On the other hand, individuals in collectivistic societies are seen as a part of a cohesive in-group. They are expected to put social harmony before individual needs. Identities and relationships are more interdependent in collectivistic societies, while those are more independent in individualistic societies (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). A comparative study of personal websites found that South Koreans tended to define their identities within the social context while Americans focused on expressing their individual characters (Kim & Papacharissi, 2003).

Collectivistic societies that are built on Confucian culture, such as South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, are also characterized by their vertical social hierarchy (Ikeda & Richey, 2005). While Western culture emphasizes freedom and equality, Confucian culture expects political leaders, as well as fathers and teachers, to be reserved and strict in their verbal and behavioral expressions. While the expression of emotion that facilitates group cohesion and cooperation is generally encouraged in collectivistic societies (Matsumoto, 1991), leaders are expected to not publicly display raw emotion or busy gestures unbecoming for their social status. Differences also exist in the way political candidates are visually framed by the news media. A study found that Taiwanese presidential candidates’ news photos were taken more from the front and less from the back, than their US counterparts (Lee et al., 2004). Frowning faces or actions and postures that showed superordinate or subordinate relationships appeared more in US candidates’ photos. It might be because Confucianism has taught leaders to keep up dignity and pursue social harmony rather than acting as an individual and revealing true feelings. Asians or Asian Americans are generally found to be more shy (Paulhus, Duncan, & Yik, 2002), less narcissistic (Paulhus, Westlake, Calvez, & Harms, 2013), less argumentative (Aune, Hunter, Kim, & Kim, 2001), more compromising (Min, 2009), more comfortable with societal power inequalities, and more obedient to authority than Americans (Hofstede, 2001).

Such cultural differences are likely to the US and South Korean incumbent presidents’ visual communication. While both countries have similar presidential systems, the former represents Western individualistic culture, and the latter represents Asian collectivistic culture that experienced a series of authoritarian dictatorships until several decades ago. Given these cultural and historical differences, the US and South Korea are likely to differ in the visual presentations of their heads of state. It is important to address if and to what extent their presidents are portrayed differently in their photos to be able to understand cultural differences in visual communication. Thus, the following research question is raised:

RQ: How do the US and South Korea differ in their presidents’ visual self-presentations?

3. Method
To investigate the research question, photos of US President Obama and former South Korean President Myung-bak Lee that were officially released through the presidents’ websites during their first year of presidency were collected. Myung-bak Lee is South Korea’s 10th president and was directly elected by popular vote. Instead of current female President Geun-hye Park, Lee was selected because he was a male president like Obama, and the two served during a similar time. Lee took office in February 2008, roughly one year before Obama’s inauguration, and served for one term which is five years. Before his election as president, he was the CEO of a major corporation in South Korea, a member of the Korean National Assembly from the major conservative party (The Grand National Party), and the mayor of Seoul.

All of Obama’s photos that were posted to the “Photos” page under “Briefing Room” on the White House website (www.whitehouse.gov) during 2009, as well as all of Lee’s photos posted to the “Photos” page under “Cheong Wa Dae2 Activities” on the website of Cheong Wa Dae (www.president.go.kr), or the Blue House, during 2008, were downloaded. Each president’s first year was selected to examine how the US and South Korea visually portrayed the presidents to the public during the early stage of their presidencies. The unit of analysis was a president’s photo. Photos in which
the president did not appear, such as photos of the First Lady or the vice president, were excluded. The total number of photos included in the analysis was 202 for Obama and 265 for Lee.

For visual analysis, 2 trained coders who had a basic knowledge of visual semiotics coded the 467 images. Each photo was coded into several categories on a number of variables:

• Shot distance: extreme wide (long-distance), wide (full body), medium (from the hips or waist up), close-up (from the shoulder up), or extreme close-up (only face or hand).
• Vertical placement of the president: top, center, or bottom.
• Horizontal placement of the president: left, center, or right.
• Coexistence: Alone, with other public figures (politicians or staffs), with family, with public figures and family together, or with ordinary people (children additionally marked).
• President’s salience when there are others in the photo: Very salient (solely), equally or similarly salient, or less salient than others.
• Action: president doing something on his own; president and additional subject(s) doing something to one another; president and additional subject(s) doing something together, but not to one another; others doing something to president (passive); both doing nothing.
• Camera angle 1 (eye): low (below eye level), normal (at eye level), or high (above eye level).
• Camera angle 2 (face): front (two eyes, two ears), side (two eyes, one ear), profile (one eye, one year), or back (no eye).
• President’s facial expression: very positive, somewhat positive, neutral, serious, sad or mournful, or others.
• Gesture: no gesture, hand gesture, body gesture, or hand and body gesture together.
• Use of symbols: no symbol, flags, official seal, or others.
• Setting: indoor or outdoor.
• Circumstance: official, semi-official, or non-official.
• Dress: formal, semi-formal, or casual.

For each variable, “unclear” was included as a category, and cases that fell into the category were treated as missing data. Based on 10% of the sample photographs, a high level of intercoder reliability (.93, according to Krippendorff’s Alpha) was achieved.

4. Results

4.1. Shot distance
The wide shot that shows a candidate’s entire body was the most popular for both Obama (45%) and Lee (47.9%), followed by the medium shot (43.4 and 44.1%) and the close-up (10.9 and 8.7%). A chi-square test of the overall difference in shot distance between the two countries was not significant.

4.2. Vertical & horizontal placement
There were significant differences in the ways the US and South Korea placed their presidents in the frame. In terms of vertical placement, the central placement was significantly more common to Lee (84.9%) than to Obama (67.8%). The top third area, which represents the future, was more popular in Obama’s photos (19.3%) than in Lee’s (2.3%). In terms of horizontal placement, both Obama (39.1%) and Lee (47%) were most commonly placed at the right-hand side of the frame, which tends to elicit the viewer’s greatest attention. The next most popular spot of the frame differed by country: the center for Obama (35.6%) and the left side for Lee (30.7%). Overall, the difference in vertical placement was significant: Chi-square = 38.87, df = 2, p < .001, $\phi = .29$, as well as the difference in horizontal placement: Chi-square = 10.01, df = 2, $p = .007, \phi = .15$.3
4.3. Coexistence
While the most commonly appearing people were “other public figures” for both countries, they were more dominant in Lee’s photos (85.7%) than in Obama’s (54.9%). A chi-square test focusing on the appearance of public figures was significant: Chi-square = 37.45, df = 1, p < .00, $\phi = .28$. For Obama, more than half (51.6%) of the public figures were domestic politicians such as people in his administration. In Lee’s photos, in contrast, almost three quarters (74.2%) of them were foreign leaders. Children (excluding the president’s own children) were popular subjects in Obama’s photos (7.9%), while they rarely appeared in Lee’s photos (1.5%). Including children, ordinary people appeared more frequently in Obama’s photos (25.2%) than Lee’s (7.5%): Chi-square = 27.86, df = 1, $p < .001$, $\phi = .24$. Obama’s family members were included in his photos significantly more frequently (6.4%) than Lee’s family (2.3%): Chi-square = 5.11, df = 1, $p = .024$, $\phi = .11$. Photos where the president appeared on his own were more common in the US (13.4%) than in South Korea (4.5%): Chi-square = 11.70, df = 1, $p < .001$, $\phi = .16$. The overall differences were strong and significant: Chi-square = 55.02, df = 5, $p < .001$, $\phi = .34$.

4.4. Salience
In terms of how saliently the presidents were featured compared to others in the frame, the two countries’ photos did not differ significantly. In cases where others were included in the photos ($N = 428$), both presidents were most likely to be given the same or a similar level of salience to that of others. Although the overall difference in salience was not significant, Obama had more photos where he stood out than others (11.4%) than Lee (5.9%): Chi-square = 4.17, df = 1, $p = .041$, $\phi = .10$.

4.5. Action
An action the president was taking at the moment of photo shooting significantly differed by country: Chi-square = 41.62, df = 6, $p < .001$, $\phi = .30$. While the most common action both presidents took was “doing something to one another” along with other people (Obama: 35.1%, Lee: 45.3%), it was significantly more common to Lee (45.3%) than to Obama (35.1%): Chi-square = 4.05, df = 1, $p = .044$, $\phi = .09$. Photos where the president was doing something alone were significantly more common in the US (13.3%) than in South Korea (2.7%): Chi-square = 18.97, df = 1, $p < .001$, $\phi = .20$. The differences between the two countries for other actions were not significant.

4.6. Aamera angle 1 (eye level)
Obama was the most commonly photographed from “above (his) eye level” (42.8%) followed by “at eye level” (23.9%) and “below eye level” (33.3%). Lee was the most commonly photographed “at eye level” (39.6%) followed by “above eye level” (32.1%) and “below eye level” (28.3%). The overall difference was significant: Chi-square = 13.15, df = 2, $p = .001$, $\phi = .17$.

4.7. Camera angle 2 (face)
There was a significant difference between the US and South Korea regarding the perspective from which the president was shown: Chi-square = 65.99, df = 3, $p < .001$, $\phi = .38$. Interestingly, Obama was most commonly framed in profile (42.6%), followed by side (23.8%), back (19.8%) and front (13.4%). For Lee, the side angle from which his two eyes and one ear were showing was most common (39.6%), followed by profile (32.1%) and front (27.2%). An angle that photographed him from behind was rare (1.1%). Overall, regular front and side angles were more popularly used in South Korea than in the US, while the profile and the back angles were more popularly used in the US than in South Korea. The differences were significant in each of the categories.

4.8. Facial expression
The two presidents’ most commonly photographed facial expressions significantly differed: Chi-square = 13.16, df = 4, $p = .011$, $\phi = .18$. While neutral expression was the most common in both Obama’s (39.6%) and Lee’s (43.4%) photos, the likelihood of smiling was significantly higher for Lee (big smile 32.8%, soft smile 18.9%) than for Obama (big 19.3%, soft 12.9%): Chi-square = 5.80, df = 1, $p = .016$, $\phi = .12$. Like in a previous study (Lee et al., 2004), frowning was more common in the US
while Lee rarely frowned in front of the camera (1.9%): Chi-square = 7.95, df = 1, p = .005, \( \phi = .14 \).

4.9. Gesture
Overall, the two countries significantly differed in terms of gesture: Chi-square = 15.85, df = 3, \( p = .001, \phi = .19 \). Although both presidents commonly made hand gestures, such as shaking hands and waving (Obama 55.9%, Lee 50.9%), Lee was significantly more likely to make no gesture at all (44.2%) than Obama (29.2%): Chi-square = 9.54, df = 1, \( p = .002, \phi = .15 \). Obama was significantly more likely to make a body gesture (5%) than Lee (1.5%): Chi-square = 4.93, df = 1, \( p = .026, \phi = .10 \), as well as both hand and body gestures (5.9% vs. 2.3%): Chi-square = 4.46, df = 1, \( p = .035, \phi = .10 \).

4.10. Use of symbols
Symbols of patriotism were more frequently used in Lee’s (38.5%) photos than in Obama’s (23.8%): Chi-square = 17.84, df = 2, \( p < .001, \phi = .20 \). National flags appeared almost twice as frequently in Lee’s photos (34%) as in Obama’s photos (17.8%). Official presidential seals were more likely to appear in Obama’s photos (5.4%) than in Lee’s (2.3%).

4.11. Setting
For both presidents, indoor shots were more common than outdoor shots. A chi-square test of the setting excluding unclear situations (5.4%) indicated that indoor settings were significantly more common in Lee’s photos (80.7%) than in Obama’s (72.5%): Chi-square = 4.07, df = 1, \( p = .044, \phi = .10 \).

4.12. Circumstance
Although most photos have been taken during official events for both presidents, it was significantly more likely for Lee (80.4%) than Obama (72.5%). Less formal, semi-official situations were more common for Obama (22.8%) than Lee (17.4%). While 2% of Obama’s photos were taken in non-official situations, there was not a single photo in which Lee appeared in a non-official circumstance. The overall differences between the two countries were significant: Chi-square = 7.93, df = 2, \( p = .019, \phi = .13 \).

4.13. Dress
For both presidents, “suit and tie” was the most common attire (Obama: 82.7%; Lee: 96.6%). Obama was found in semi-formal dress (e.g. dress shirt with no jacket) in 16.8% of his photos. Lee was dressed in a suit save for only 3.4% of his photos. The difference was significant: Chi-square = 24.94, df = 1, \( p < .001, \phi = .23 \).

5. Discussion
The objective of this study was to investigate whether and how the US and South Korean presidents were presented differently in the photos their offices released. The results of comprehensive visual analysis of Obama and Lee’s first-year photos based on visual semiotics and framing theories demonstrate that there are significant overall differences between the two countries’ ways of portraying their presidents.

First, there was a difference in political character frames the two countries dominantly used to construct their presidents’ public images. Lee’s most heavily emphasized characteristic was statesmanship; he was repeatedly photographed in formal attire while standing shoulder-to-shoulder with other international leaders. This, often combined with the national flag in the background, helped frame Lee as a powerful, internationally recognized leader (Figure 1). A majority of the Blue House photos presented Lee and a foreign leader side by side with a roughly equal amount of space and salience assigned to both sides. On the other hand, Obama’s character was constructed with a wider variety of frames (Figure 2); he was photographed not only in a formal attire with high-ranking peers or while appearing in front of the American flag (statesmanship frame), but also while intimately interacting with ordinary citizens or his own family (compassion frame) and while wearing casual or semi-formal attire (ordinariness frame). The camera often focused on showing supportive crowds’ enthusiastic
Figure 1. (a) President Lee and Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir holding a summit, May 2008. (b) President Lee meeting with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, June 2008. (c) President Lee addressing the opening ceremony of the OECD Ministerial Meeting on the Future of the Internet Economy, June 2008. (d) President Lee attending a signing ceremony for agreements between Korea and China, May 2008. (e) President Lee meeting with Founder and Executive Chairman Klaus Schwab of the World Economic Forum, June 2008. (f) President Lee, making a visit to the Korean Team and delivering the remarks of encouragement, July 2008.

Figure 2. (a) President Barack Obama greets people at the Port of Spain airport before departing for Washington, DC on 19 April 2009. (b) A person in the crowd gives President Barack Obama a hug during the town hall meeting at the University of New Orleans in New Orleans, LA, 15 October 2009. (c) President Barack Obama talks with students during a visit to the Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School in the Lower 9th Ward of New Orleans, LA, 15 October 2009. (d) President Barack Obama embraces First Lady Michelle Obama as she prepares to leave for her return to the United States 5 April 2009, as President Obama continued his overseas travel schedule, 8 April 2009.

Source: Official White House Photo by Pete Souza.
reactions to Obama (mass appeal frame). These frames contributed to Obama’s construction as an ideal average person with compassion who cherishes the traditional value of family. First Lady Michelle Obama and the couple’s two daughters frequently appeared with the president, which also contributed to the compassion frame. In contrast, South Korean First Lady Yoon-ok Kim was captured in the Blue House photos almost only when she accompanied Lee on his official visits to foreign countries, and their four children never once appeared. Compared to the massive use of the statesmanship frame, populist frames (mass appeal and ordinariness) were used significantly less in Lee’s photos.

The different uses of frames between the US and South Korea reflect their cultural differences. The populist frames represent American values more than South Korean values. While the greatness of ordinary people and equality are founding philosophies in the US, South Korean history has embraced vertical hierarchy and taught citizens to respect high-ranking public officers while hiding personal feelings. While family value is one of the most esteemed principles in individualistic cultures like America, collectivistic cultures prioritize public matters over family matters. Leaders in collectivistic societies are expected to draw a strict line between public and private matters. It is therefore not surprising that Lee’s family was hardly featured in his photos as family life is regarded as a private matter that has nothing to do with one’s public or professional duties. This finding is also consistent with the known difference between the US and South Korea in commercial advertising; while the former focuses on providing general information about the product, the latter heavily relies on endorsement and appraisal of highly known figures such as celebrities (Choi, Lee, & Kim, 2005). Another possible reason for the different emphases on the statesmanship and populist frames is in the presidents’ differing international status. As the elected president of the world’s most powerful country, Obama might have not needed to demonstrate his status or legitimacy by standing next to other foreign leaders while such a behavior might be needed for Lee to construct or reinforce his image as a strong leader.

Second, photo composition elements such as framing, reflection, and unusual perspective appeared more often in White House photos. Artistic or experimental shots including extreme wide shots and extreme close ups were commonly employed by White House photographers (Figure 3).
The White House Photography Office seems to have been active in the use of other visual techniques, not only for esthetically pleasant composition, but also for strategic character framing and viewer engagement. For instance, Obama often showed his back to the camera, which, for the head of state, can have the effect of making him look transparent and trusting. Obama was more likely than Lee to be photographed in profile, with common people, both of which are effective in portraying him as a favorable (i.e. credible and likable) leader. In some photos, Obama was out of focus and functioned only as a composition element that highlighted others. In addition to building the president’s image as a good listener who respected others, those unusual perspectives added visual interests to images that would otherwise likely be monotonous and repetitive.

A framing effect is maximized when the strategic purpose behind an action is unnoticed (Wolfsfeld, 2011). Seemingly unstaged and unposed photos are more effective in increasing credibility, building perceived character traits, and facilitating parasocial relationships than staged and posed photos. In many White House photos, Obama did not appear to notice or care about the existence of the camera; the White House photographer seems to have become part of his natural environment. He was often photographed at a distance, from behind, or through a half-open door while standing alone or having a private conversation with others in and out of the White House (Figure 4). Those photos could lead the viewers to feel the president closely as if he was a character in a reality TV show.

On the contrary, Lee was more likely to make scripted poses and expressions, including his typical diplomatic smile toward foreign leaders. It was obvious that the president not only noticed cameras whenever he was photographed but also decided his behaviors considering the cameras. It could be that he was more conscious of public displays of his behaviors and emotions because of the collectivistic South Korean culture that puts more emphasis on social harmony and common goals than on individuals’ needs or true feelings. The Blue House Photographers did not particularly seem to consciously utilize visual semiotics; traditional, staged photos were dominant while realistic or esthetically sophisticated shots were rare.

Figure 4. (a) President Barack Obama reflects on the data presented during a meeting on the budget Thursday, 29 January 2009 in the Roosevelt Room of the White House, 29 January 2009. (b) President Barack Obama talks with NSC Chief of Staff Denis McDonough during the United Nations Climate Change Conference at the Bella Center in Copenhagen, Denmark, 18 December 2009. (c) President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama watch Olympian Ryan Reser, in white, and Paralympian Myles Porter, during a judo demonstration on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, 16 September 2009, during an event supporting Chicago’s 2016 Olympic bid. (d) Back on the phone, the President tries to persuade a Republican Senator to vote for the bill, 6 February 2009.

Source: Official White House Photo by Pete Souza.
Overall, the cultural differences between the two countries seem to have led the White House and the Blue House to grow differing approaches to photos: presidents’ photos as a ritual (the Blue House) and presidents’ photos as storytelling (the White House). It seems that, to the Blue House, photos are still the means of documenting important events in one’s life. This approach might have made official photo shoots at the beginning, during, and at the end of an event become a ritual; foreign leaders who visited South Korea was usually photographed when they were welcomed by Lee or the Korean military honor guard in the Blue House; when they sat down with Lee for a talk; and, finally, when they shook hands with Lee after the talk. It appears that the photographer took pictures only when a photo shoot was scheduled. As a result, Lee’s daily life and character were presented in a much narrower scope; the president was hardly presented apart from the situations he was in.

On the other hand, in the US, photos were used more as communication tools to promote the president’s character to the American public. The White House seems to focus on constructing cohesive and interesting visual narratives about Obama using a variety of strategic techniques, rather than documenting official events. Speaking in Goffman’s terms, situations Obama was in or people he was with often functioned as his stage and props to present his character. Rather than foreign leaders’ visits, visually interesting gatherings such as Easter and Halloween events that could highlight Obama’s character as a family man were more likely to be photographed. Like in a reality show, Obama was also captured in ordinary settings. This “photo as storytelling” approach seemed to encourage the photographer to employ dynamic and engaging photography techniques to make the story more interesting and effective.

It should be noted that the findings of this study based on the US and South Korean cases cannot represent all differences in presidents’ visual self-presentations between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Also, not every difference found here can be attributed to cultural factors. There might be other factors that influenced the outcomes such as political ideology as Obama was from a liberal party while Lee was from a conservative party. Social and political context is another factor; given that Obama was going to run for his next term and Lee was not, it might have been more important for the White House to appeal to ordinary citizens. The presidents’ personality traits or preferences (e.g. outgoing vs. shy) might also contribute to the results. This content analysis study could not separate out those situational and individual factors.

Nevertheless, the present study contributes to the intersection of political, strategic, visual, and intercultural communication disciplines by demonstrating that, overall, there are significant cross-cultural differences in political leaders’ visual presentations. Duncum (2004) says the visual is never exclusively visual. There are meaningful messages delivered by photos, and the meanings are socially and culturally constructed. It is important to understand how culture influences communication not only through words but also through images. The present study attempted to shed light on this overlooked research area by using a comprehensive visual analysis of presidents’ photographic portrayals in the US and South Korea. Future studies are encouraged to extend this endeavor and replicate this study in different cross-cultural contexts.

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**Notes**
1. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.
2. Cheong Wa Dae is the official residence and principal workplace of the President of South Korea located in Seoul. Because “Cheong Wa Dae” literally means “blue-roofed place,” it is also known as “The Blue House.”
3. Phi coefficient indicates the magnitude of effect: .1 = small, .3 = medium, .5 = large.
4. The South Korean Constitution prohibits presidents from serving more than one five-year term.
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