



How Are North Korean Defectors Addressed in South Korean Society on YouTube Comments?

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Abstract

This study analyzes South Koreans' perceptions of North Korean defectors (NKDs) from three points: positive, othering, and neoliberal. The positive perspective accentuates a shared ethnic identity, fostering inclusive attitudes toward NKDs as fellow citizens. Conversely, the othering perspective, rooted in South Korean superiority, associates NKDs with an inferior North Korea, often framing them as pitiable or criminal. This perception, linked to the view that welfare and educational support for NKDs constitutes reverse discrimination, fuels negative attitudes. A neoliberal perspective often portrays defectors as competitors within a capitalist society, leading to expressions of discontent among South Koreans regarding the perceived privileges afforded to them. This sentiment suggests a broader tendency to prioritize support for South Koreans. This study implicates that fostering a spirit of hospitality towards NKDs can serve as a catalyst for strengthening social integration.

Keywords: North Korean defectors, NKDs, othering, neoliberalism, North Korea, capitalism

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Introduction

Public perception of South Korea's trajectory towards a multicultural society has demonstrated significant variability over time. In a 2010 survey, a majority of respondents (60.6%) supported the idea that South Korea should move toward a multiethnic and multicultural nation, and that proportion increased to 61.1 percent in 2014; however, it sharply declined to 49.6 percent by 2015. Furthermore, the percentage of people expressing discomfort with accepting people of different racial, religious, or cultural backgrounds rose from 48.9 to 56.9 percent, in 2010 and 2015, respectively (Yoon 2016). While South Korea formally recognizes certain immigrant groups as a part of the broader Korean ethnonational community, it assigns them a marginalized or subordinate status within society (Seol and Skrantny 2009).

This phenomenon—where individuals of shared ethnic origin are incorporated into the national collective yet positioned unequally—is conceptualized as hierarchical nationhood. Hierarchical nationhood simultaneously acknowledges shared ancestry while encompassing internal differentiation. Dominant groups maintain kinship sentiments, yet engage in informal discrimination, resulting in challenges for co-ethnics seeking social integration (Seol and Skrantny 2009). While scholars remain divided as to whether NKDs should be classified as a part of multicultural minorities, this study views NKDs as migrants who face structural disadvantages due to prejudice and discrimination in South Korea. Although 27.3 percent of the respondents, in a 2015 survey, believed that NKDs should be considered distinct from naturalized immigrants, a larger proportion (39.2%) disagreed, indicating moderate public resistance to differentiating NKDs based on ethnic ties (Yoon 2016). Although NKDs hold South Korean citizenship, they are perceived by the general public as individuals originating from the North, instead of co-nationals, thereby remaining socially distinguished from mainstream South Koreans.

Scholarly interest in North Korea has increased markedly in recent decades. Once largely excluded from theoretical discourse due to its political isolation and limited accessibility, North Korea was traditionally regarded as

a “hermit regime” (Seo and Nah 2020, 1308). However, since the 1990s, its nuclear ambitions, evolving inter-Korean relations, and severe human rights issues have increasingly garnered academic attention. A substantial portion of the related research has focused on media representations of North Korea, particularly within the field of journalism. For instance, Seo and Nah (2020) reported that over half of media studies related to North Korea relied on content analysis in journalism, while only a small proportion addressed audience reception through interviews or surveys. This indicated a significant imbalance: although North Korean representations are widely examined, there remains a notable gap in understanding how such portrayals are received and interpreted by the public.

The constraints inherent in existing scholarship are particularly conspicuous in the field of NKD studies, which has received heightened academic focus concurrent with the NKDs’ growing social prominence in the Republic of Korea. The increase in the number of NKDs who have established residency in South Korea since the early 2000s has, predictably, generated a proportional growth in research analyzing their representation across media platforms (Jonghwan Choi et al. 2022). While the bulk of this work has concentrated on examining the discursive construction of defectors within news media and televised programs (Jinwoo Choi et al. 2020), the perspective of the audience remains significantly underrepresented. This oversight holds critical implications, largely because the majority of South Koreans maintain minimal direct engagement with the NKD community. Consequently, mediated portrayals serve a fundamental role in establishing wider societal perceptions (J. Park et al. 2022).

This study addresses this notable research gap by analyzing audience perceptions of journalistic content featuring NKDs. Focusing on user comments on YouTube videos produced by South Korea’s public broadcasting service, KBS, it examines how viewers engage with media portrayals of defectors. YouTube enables users to express spontaneous and often emotionally charged reactions, so through a textual analysis of these comments, this study offers insights into the interpretive patterns, empathetic responses, and social tensions surrounding the issue of NKDs.

Literature Review

Existing Research on NKDs

NKDs are important due to their large population and shared ethnic identity, often seen as *forerunners* for reunification (Han 2019). The South Korean government has acknowledged their role, enacting the North Korean Refugee Protection and Settlement Support Act. Research on NKDs began in the 1990s, focusing on support systems and legislation, and expanded in the 2000s to include factors influencing adaptation (Baek and Kwon 2018). With the decreased number of defectors passing through China due to COVID-19, recent cases indicate an increase in defectors heading directly to South Korea (Christina Choi 2024).

Research on factors in the adaptation of NKDs can be categorized as follows: First, personal factors such as sex, age, education, religion, length of stay, and health have been shown to significantly impact adaptation (Yoon and Han 2022; Lee and Eom 2003). However, numerous defectors encounter post-traumatic stress disorder from defection experiences that pose a threat to life (J. Y. Kim et al. 2012). Second, economic factors, such as income and employment status, are also considerable. Third, sociocultural factors, such as knowledge of South Korean society and culture (Song and Kim 2015) and biases or prejudices by South Koreans (Yoon 2007), play significant roles.

A review of the extant literature on NKD adaptation reveals persistent challenges and areas for improvement. Despite South Korean citizenship, a significant number of defectors face marginalization and difficulties in integrating into society (Im et al. 2012). The majority arrive with dissolved family units and an absence of psychological support networks (Yoon 2007). Even after completing programs, such as the Hanawon Resettlement Center, and obtaining public housing, meaningful interactions with South Koreans remain infrequent (Song and Kim 2015), resulting in loneliness, alienation, and feelings of inferiority. Addressing these psychological and social challenges necessitates the enhancement of social support systems (C. G. Kim 2011) and the cultivation of a deeper understanding of South Koreans' perceptions to foster inclusivity.

The Othering of NKDs and North Korean Society

NKDs are deeply connected to the political and military history of the Korean Peninsula. After Korea's liberation from Japan in 1945, the 1948 division led to two distinct political systems. The 1953 Korean War armistice reduced interactions between North and South Korea, with exchanges limited to government-approved cases (Chun 2022). South Korea portrayed NKDs as heroes to emphasize the superiority of its capitalist system. This narrative was solidified in 1978 with the "78 Act," positioning defectors as symbols of South Korea's dominance (Oh 2011).

A shift in NKD arrivals occurred in 1995, and by the 2000s the majority of NKDs were impoverished, undereducated farmers or low-income individuals, unlike the earlier elites familiar with North Korea's bureaucracy (Lankov 2016). In the late 1990s, the Kim Dae-jung administration adopted a human rights approach, recognizing NKDs as refugees. However, the South Korean right wing used this terminology ideologically, fostering ethnic Korean and economic migrant discourses (S. K. Kim 2012). Regardless of background, NKDs were seen as symbols of North Korea's deficiencies and labeled negatively as "defectors" (Byungsoo Lee 2014).

The distinction between NKDs and South Koreans is largely cultural, highlighted by differences in accent, tone, and communication style. Even fluent Korean speakers face exclusion once their origins are revealed (Chun 2022). The stigma of being a defector leads some North Korean youth to conceal their backgrounds to avoid negative perceptions (Hyun-Sook Lee and Hea Sook Lee 2015).

In South Korean media, defectors are portrayed as the opposite of mainstream society, reinforcing the image of North Korea as backward and South Korea as advanced. This perpetuates the view of North Korea as an inferior other and fosters a sense of superiority among South Koreans (Cho 2018; Kathy Lee et al. 2019; Jang and Park 2015; E. Kim 2016; Oh 2016). Television programs such as *Immangap*, which feature NKDs, emphasize the happiness of a capitalist society, reinforcing South Korea's superiority and perpetuating Cold War-era dichotomies (Cho 2018).

The Position of NKDs within Neoliberalism and Capitalism

In the early phase of the inter-Korean conflict, South Korea offered substantial resettlement support to NKDs, primarily benefiting elite defectors, such as diplomats and officials. The demographic profile of defectors underwent a critical transformation from the early 2000s onward, with the majority now primarily consisting of individuals from working-class or rural backgrounds (Lankov 2016). Their average earnings hover at approximately 70% of the national average wage, concurrently facing an unemployment rate that is twice as high as that of the South Korean general population. Furthermore, dependence on basic livelihood support is a pressing issue, afflicting close to 29 percent of the defector community; this figure dramatically eclipses the 4.8 percent among the broader populace of South Korea (Yang 2023). NKDs face multifaceted employment challenges in South Korea. Their lack of personal networks, linguistic barriers, and the non-recognition of North Korean education by South Korean society hinder their entry into the labor market. Consequently, many defectors remain in lower socioeconomic positions, experiencing poverty, social isolation, and intergenerational discrimination (Lankov 2016).

Neoliberalism, which emphasizes individual responsibility, productivity, and economic autonomy, has shaped South Korean attitudes toward defectors. However, it has been critiqued for overlooking the structural challenges faced by marginalized groups (D. Seo 2010; Lee and Heo 2014; Soo-Jung Lee 2017). The increase in NKD arrivals during the 2000s, following the 1997 financial crisis, intensified economic competition, youth unemployment, and the wealth gap. This period fostered perceptions of defectors as economic burdens, fueling hostility as they were seen as parasitic and wasteful of taxpayers' money (Byungsoo Lee 2014). Consequently, many defectors view South Korea as a materialistic society focused on survival, leaving little room for the vulnerable (Yoon 2001). While some defectors from the upper class are embraced in media portrayals, others experience alienation, particularly in programs such as *Moranbong Club*. Such programs tend to accentuate elitism and materialism, yet fail to critically engage with underlying class dynamics (Cho 2018).

In the context of neoliberal and meritocratic systems, some defectors have been known to “flee South Korea” (Oh 2011). Although NKDs criticize North Korea’s system, many maintain emotional ties to their homeland and advocate for “capitalism based on collectivism” (Byungsoo Lee 2014). Some literature suggests that providing these individuals with opportunities to overcome initial disadvantages and shielding them from direct competition with native South Koreans could mitigate their challenges (Yoon 2001).

Hospitality Theory

This study adopted the hospitality theory to examine the integration of NKDs in South Korea. Hospitality, in this context, requires more than surface-level acceptance. It involves an ethical and relational openness to the unfamiliar, grounded in three key principles: transboundariness, equality, and conviviality (Hong and Mo 2019).

Transboundariness means openness and acceptance that embraces discomfort and relinquishes certain privileges, involving genuinely listening to NKDs, respecting their aspirations, and engaging with them beyond imposed categories (Jinwoo Choi et al. 2020). Equality emphasizes parity and shared vulnerability. It rejects patronizing or hierarchical approaches, recognizing NKDs as fellow citizens deserving of equal dignity and inclusion. By acknowledging that anyone can experience marginality, it fosters solidarity and resists the tendency to other NKDs (Jinwoo Choi et al. 2020). Conviviality emphasizes reciprocal understanding and proactive support of NKDs’ capabilities for the shared benefit of individuals and communities (Han and Choi 2018). It is not about enhancing their skills as a condition of economic or social aid. Rather, it fosters a dynamic of mutual growth. By creating a space where NKDs can freely develop their abilities, they are moved away from being passive beneficiaries (Jinwoo Choi et al. 2020).

Methods

This study investigated how NKDs are portrayed in South Korean society

through audience responses to journalistic coverage. Using textual analysis, the study applied semiotic techniques, such as categorization, classifying entities based on shared attributes, and overlexicalization,¹ the excessive or exaggerated use of similar terms. Drawing on Hyun-Sook Lee and Hea Sook Lee (2015), the analysis considered the broader social context and processes of meaning-making. As a qualitative method, textual analysis enabled a nuanced exploration of the comments and underlying audience perceptions, making it suitable for examining discourse on NKDs, North Korea, and South Korea.

This study analyzed comments on KBS's journalistic videos featuring NKDs. KBS was selected for its substantial role in shaping public perception, particularly among South Koreans with limited direct interaction with defectors. Notably, the documentary *KBS Sunday Special: What's Happening with NKDs* (originally aired June 22, 1997) was the first to spotlight NKDs, garnering a record 20 percent viewership and drawing public attention to their harsh living conditions (Heo 1997; Sung 2010). Since then, KBS has continued producing NKD-related content, playing a central role in influencing societal perceptions and narratives surrounding their integration.

This study examined four videos from the North Korean Issues Collection² playlist on the KBS Current Affairs channel (*KBS sisa*), focusing on those related to defectors. To reduce the risk of comment bias resulting from politically sensitive issues, this study excluded videos focused on North Korea's military activities (e.g., ballistic missile launches, nuclear tests) or topics not directly related to NKDs. Non-documentary content was also excluded to ensure consistency in tone and format. These videos covered

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1. Overlexicalization refers to a discursive strategy in which particular individuals or events are described through the excessive repetition of similar or synonymous lexical items, directing the recipient's attention toward a specific perspective (Teo 2000). This strategy functions as a form of categorization by selectively emphasizing certain attributes of a subject, positioning it within a particular interpretive frame (Sun-Min Lee and Sang-Gil Lee 2015).
 2. *KBS Sisa* (KBS News & Current Affairs), accessed July 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxcuDFmc6_g&list=PLjESAf4PvYLmDJPgKP3F8DQdSs2jE1OeB.

various NKD experiences, including traumatic escapes, struggles with integration, and societal challenges in South Korea. Each portrayed a different facet of NKD experiences, which allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted public reception of NKDs.

Video 1 on Escape, Trauma, and Resettlement

This documentary sheds light on the severe trauma by NKDs, placing particular emphasis on their escape journeys. It delves into the multifaceted difficulties—both psychological and economic—that arise during their resettlement in South Korea. It explores both the sympathy and prejudice encountered.

Video 2 on Defectors and the Illicit Drug Trade

This video examines the involvement of some NKDs in the illicit drug trade, particularly methamphetamine production and trafficking, driven by economic desperation. It explores how North Korea facilitated drug production for foreign currency. It highlights the criminalization of defectors in South Korea and the implications of their marginalized social position.

Video 3 on Young Defectors and Mental Health

The video focuses on the mental health crisis among young NKDs, showing how isolation and discrimination fuel their high rates of depression and suicide, suggesting that this vulnerable group needs better psychological care and broader social acceptance.

Video 4 on Systemic Barriers and Tragedy in Resettlement

This video examines the tragic case of Han and her son, who died after being denied welfare support, highlighting systemic barriers to NKD resettlement. It explores structural issues, such as economic precarity, employment challenges, and social prejudice, that impede defectors' integration into South Korean society.

Two of the four videos were aired in November 2019 and March 2021 when

inter-Korean relationships were relatively stable and not dominated by major political or military incidents. The other two videos were broadcast in July and October 2022. While the administration of Yoon Suk-yeol officially designated North Korea as the main enemy in early 2022, they were aired several months after this political shift. Therefore, this study mitigated the influence of acute security-related tensions on public discourse surrounding NKDs.

A total of 1,795 comments were collected from the four videos through web crawling and compiled into an Excel file. Of these comments, those unrelated to defectors, North Korea, or ambiguous, and those not written in Korean or claiming the author was a defector, were excluded from analysis. The remaining comments were sorted and categorized into subgroups for subsequent discussion.

The analysis led to 15 distinct categories, which were subsequently consolidated into three broader themes based on commonalities. Specifically, the theme designated as Empathy and Support for NKDs comprised several distinct elements: expressions of sympathy and deep concern, the necessity of changing public perceptions, constructive policy proposals for defectors, and the acknowledgment of positive attributes of North Korea. Moreover, the soundness of this final thematic structure was affirmed through detailed deliberation with a co-author, thereby guaranteeing the methodological rigor and reliability of the overall study.

Results

Empathy and Support for NKDs

A predominant discourse among South Koreans concerning NKDs is characterized by sympathy and support. A significant number of commenters articulated their hope for the happiness and adaptation of defectors in South Korea, employing terms such as “happiness” and “adaptation” to express their sentiment.

Defectors were regarded as “citizens of the Republic of Korea,” “compa-

triot,” or pivotal figures in reunification. A substantial proportion of South Koreans advocated for the cessation of discrimination against them with a prevailing consensus that defectors should be welcomed and integrated into society. Commentors expressed sympathy, emphasizing that, despite their status as compatriots, defectors encountered adversity solely due to their birthplace. North Korea was widely perceived as a society characterized by “horrific life” and “the worst treatment of human dignity.” South Koreans expressed confidence in the defectors’ ability to adapt to life in South Korea. Some voiced concerns that the deliberate absence of facial blurring in the depiction of defectors might inadvertently stigmatize them.

Some commenters, while not explicitly mentioning defectors as “compatriots,” demonstrated empathy for their experiences in South Korea. They identified with the challenges faced by defector mothers in raising children or drew parallels between their experiences of studying abroad and those of defectors. Many expressed profound sympathy for defector mothers, particularly those who had taken their lives due to the challenges encountered in South Korea.

They came to live, so they must live on. May they live so happily that it drives Kim’s regime crazy with envy. As a parent myself, this really breaks my heart.

When I was studying abroad, I was so lonely I wanted to die, but I managed to survive thinking of my family back in Korea...If you don’t have family or close ones, it’s understandable that you might feel you have no choice but to die...

South Koreans acknowledged the immense difficulty of defecting, describing defectors as having “overcome suffering” and “risked their lives” to escape. They cheered for defectors to find happiness in South Korea, with many expressing admirations for those who succeeded in defecting, referring to them as “truly remarkable people.” This admiration for their resilience translated into a belief that they would be able to overcome the difficulties they encountered in South Korea. Many believed that defectors who “risked

their lives” to reach South Korea would likely succeed in adapting to the country, despite hardships.

Defecting was hard, and life in South Korea will be tough... but think of how much better it is than the North, and please stay strong and do well here. I respect the pastor too, for doing such good work for over 20 years. Thank you.

I completely agree. You risked your life to come here. With that determination, what can't you achieve? Forget the scars caused by people, and enjoy your freedom. There are many good people here—win and find happiness for sure!

One commenter cautiously suggested that the defector who committed suicide due to difficulties in South Korea may have survived if they had “believed in themselves and held onto hope for the future.” This reflected the view that the failure to adapt to South Korean society could be attributed to the defectors’ will.

Although defectors made an independent decision to defect, reducing their adaptation challenges to their will overlooked the broader socioeconomic realities. According to the 2021 NKD Socioeconomic Integration Survey, 26.3 percent of defectors considered relocating to a third country, largely due to perceived discrimination in South Korea (Su-hyeon Lee 2022). Additionally, 16.1 percent of the defectors reported experiencing discrimination or neglect (B. Kim 2022). Moreover, some commenters implied that defectors should endure or accept the discrimination faced during the adaptation process. Some suggested that defectors were in a better position than migrant workers from other countries and should not feel discriminated against or disappointed in South Korea. One commenter indicated that defectors should be open about their status to receive the needed support, and they need to demonstrate an effort to integrate into society for others to feel motivated to help them.

Some commenters proposed the adaptation of policies to facilitate the successful adaptation of defectors to South Korean society. Their proposals

encompassed:

- 1) The provision of more comprehensive job adaptation training and the establishment of institutions to support defector children in their mothers' economic endeavors.
- 2) The incorporation of psychological adaptation training.
- 3) The provision of comprehensive economic support, particularly for defector youth, through services or foster families.
- 4) The augmentation of educational programs at institutions, such as Hanawon, to prepare defectors for life in South Korea.
- 5) The reinforcement of legal penalties for defectors who perpetrated crimes to prevent recidivism.
- 6) Fostering social relationships by creating spaces for defectors to forge friendships and facilitating family reunification.
- 7) Defector education about the available institutions and resources for assistance during crises.

While the discourse of sympathy and encouragement suggests a budding form of hospitality toward NKDs, it reveals limitations when evaluated through the hospitality theory. In particular, although elements of trans-boundariness are discernible, such as welcoming defectors and acknowledging their hardships, true equality and conviviality remain less developed. The notion that defectors should endure discrimination or prove themselves reinforces hierarchical relationships, hindering an egalitarian approach. Moreover, the call for defectors to adapt without corresponding societal changes suggests that conviviality, that is, reciprocal engagement and mutual empowerment, is not firmly rooted. To foster authentic hospitality, South Korean society must move beyond compassion based on pity toward an ethic of shared vulnerability, parity, and active collaboration that recognizes NKDs as co-constructors of a common social fabric.

Hence, the first discourse identified from the perspective of South Koreans highlighted encouragement. Many viewed defectors as fellow citizens and compatriots with a hope for them to successfully adapt. Those who expressed sympathy, empathy, and support for defectors acknowledged that stereotypes and discrimination persist in South Korea. However, views

about how to address these issues diverged into two perspectives: some believed that attitudes toward defectors should change with more supportive policies, while others felt that defectors needed to acknowledge their situation and work toward adaptation. The latter viewpoint affirmed the defectors' intrinsic resilience, recognizing their successful escape attempt as a foundational basis for subsequent success in overcoming challenges within the host society.

The discourse of empathy and support toward defectors has been shaped by South Korea's broader sociopolitical history, particularly national narratives surrounding division and reunification. Under the Sunshine Policy, there was a notable emphasis on shared ethnic identity and humanitarian responsibility (Ryu and Lee 2021). The statements made by President Kim Dae-jung upon returning from his groundbreaking summit in Pyongyang in 2000 highlighted that NKDs are co-ethnics playing a role in accelerating unification (Son 2016). This indicated that defectors were not perceived as political exiles, but instead as members of the Korean ethnic community, who were messengers of unification.

This helped normalize public expressions of empathy, which influence popular perceptions today. However, such sympathetic views can be double-edged. While they often underpin support for welfare policies and social programs targeting defectors, they may carry implicit expectations. Some comments suggested that defectors should demonstrate gratitude in return for the support they receive. This conditional compassion can be intertwined with attitudes toward long-term state assistance, resulting in a public divide between those advocating for continued support and those emphasizing personal responsibility.

While the encouragement discourse highlighted a sense of shared identity, negative perceptions towards NKDs also simultaneously existed. These contradictions in sentiments suggest that defectors are situated at the intersection of familiarity and otherness: they are not only recognized as *one of us* with shared ethnicity and language, but also perceived as *others* tainted by an association with the North Korean regime. This dual positioning has complicated their integration into South Korean society and reflects broader tensions within inter-Korean relationships and national identity formation.

Us versus Them: Negative Perceptions toward NKDs and North Korea

Many commentators expressed negative sentiments toward the North Korean regime and its social systems. North Korea was often depicted as a nation lacking “human rights and freedom,” as the “most corrupt” and “abnormal hell,” and its regime was described as “traitors of the nation.” This mirrored how South Korean media traditionally portrayed North Korean society. In shows like *Let’s Live Well (Jal sarabose)*, North Korea is depicted as inferior, emphasizing its backwardness and immaturity, while contrasting it with South Korea’s civilization, maturity, progress, and superiority (Pang and Lee 2016). Similarly, some video comments referred to North Korea as a “rogue state” involved in “drugs, Bitcoin theft, smuggling, and nuclear blackmail,” where human rights were absent. The people residing in North Korea were perceived as “living close by, with similar appearances and language,” however, as fundamentally different from South Koreans, and “pitiful residents.”

North Korea is the true axis of evil, far worse than Iran, Iraq, Syria, Venezuela, or Congo, causing a true global nuisance.

When the videos focused on NKDs involved in drug-related crimes, viewers’ reactions intensified. Comments like “Stop accepting NKDs” generalized all NKDs as criminals, with viewers expressing reluctance to associate with them. One comment likened a reunified Korea to the lawless Philippines of the 1940s and 1950s, warning that the country would be overrun with drugs due to the presence of NKDs.

NKD who migrate to South Korea are seen as “rescued victims” from a “criminal state,” primarily because they escaped from a country that “should no longer exist.” As such, viewers reacted negatively when defectors contradicted the stereotype of defecting from a poor country to a wealthy one, or when they believed that NKDs were misusing the welfare benefits in South Korea. This negative sentiment was particularly strong when content mentioned NKDs eating well in North Korea, NKDs moving to other countries after settling in South Korea (termed ‘re-defection’), or NKDs

returning to North Korea. Many viewers were resentful when they saw the fact that some NKDs had eaten three full meals a day before defecting in a video, as this challenged the assumption that they had fled an inferior society to join a superior one.

For South Korean viewers, North Korea is a poor country, and defectors are those who flee for freedom. When NKDs were shown emigrating from South Korea to other countries, viewers interpreted this as a sign of maladjustment and maintained negative attitudes. Strong dissatisfaction was expressed toward NKDs, who returned to North Korea, as this was seen as a rejection of a superior society in favor of an inferior one.

So if you had no problem getting three meals a day, why did you risk your life to defect? The difference between South Korea and North Korea is the ability to eat three meals a day and the freedom to live. If, according to the survey, 90 percent of NKDs were eating three meals a day, then does this mean they risked their lives for freedom? Did they believe in an illusion of freedom that didn't exist in South Korea?

Nonsense about meat. Why are you lying when it's hard to even get a drop of oil there?

Furthermore, viewers reacted negatively when they believed that NKDs were sending money earned in South Korea back to North Korea, or receiving excessive support. When they saw NKDs receiving settlement payments and marrying foreigners, they expressed sentiments of "shamelessness." The perspective of viewing NKDs as a problem or subject of criticism often emphasized that their settlement in South Korea was supported by taxpayer money, contributing to the perception that they were a burden on South Korean society. For example, some comments suggested that NKDs were under the "illusion" that everything would be provided to them upon arrival in South Korea, and they need to realize that "without effort, there is no reward." These comments are based on the belief that South Korean residents suffer from reverse discrimination (Choi and Kim 2013).

According to a previous study (Geon Lee 2015), fairness in opportunity

is negatively correlated with social conflict. Fairness is a key social condition that reduces social conflict and promotes social integration. In this study as well, welfare benefits, educational opportunities, and employment opportunities provided to NKDs led to perceptions of reverse discrimination among Koreans, resulting in negative views toward non-naturalized foreigners. Extreme opinions, such as “I don’t want my taxes feeding NKDs,” were present.

It seems that NKDs come here just to make money and send it back to North Korea. If South Korea helps them, they should pay taxes and settle here. I really hope no more NKDs come.

NKDs think that as soon as they arrive in South Korea, they’ll live comfortably. Look at Chinese people—without any support, they work in caregiving or restaurants and earn over 3 million won. It’s about hard work, not about being special. But there are many South Koreans who have it tough, too. People in South Korea are unhappy that NKDs receive more benefits than South Koreans do.

Furthermore, some expressed the view that North Koreans, having been raised in North Korean society, have such radically different and incompatible ways of thinking that their mass migration to South Korea would create “large-scale chaos and uncontrollable situations.” This extreme view stemmed from the perception that the 70-year separation between the two nations had transformed the cultures of ordinary citizens, with South Korea adhering to “liberal democracy” and North Korea to “pseudo-communism.” These negative perceptions emerged from a broader discourse of South Korean superiority shaped by national division and Cold War ideology. Consequently, viewers maintained a sense of superiority toward North Koreans and NKDs.

Some viewers expressed gratitude for having been born in South Korea, noting that they had not committed any past misdeeds to deserve being born elsewhere. Such comments reflected the belief that one’s fate is largely determined by where one was born, and therefore being born in South

Korea was a blessing. Comments like “I used to think I was unhappy, but now I feel lucky to have been born here” were found as well. These attitudes suggested that viewers often engaged in “downward comparison” as a form of consolation in the struggles of NKDs.

Negative perceptions of NKDs by South Korean viewers stemmed from *othering* and a sense of superiority. NKDs were often seen as products of a poor, criminal state, leading to views of them as either pitiful or intrinsically linked to crime. Some viewers expressed discomfort or resentment toward the perceived misuse of taxpayer funds for their support, citing concerns of reverse discrimination.

Under the hospitality theory, these negative perceptions toward NKDs could be understood as a failure of unconditional hospitality. True hospitality demands genuine acceptance of the other, without preconditions or expectations. However, the attitudes observed in the comments reflected *conditional hospitality*, where NKDs were accepted only if they aligned with the host society’s standards of behavior, loyalty, and gratitude.

This conditional approach highlights the underlying South Korean superiority complex: NKDs are expected to assimilate and conform as a demonstration of South Korea’s civilizational and moral dominance. NKDs are not seen as equals but rather as recipients of South Korean “generosity,” entrenching a dynamic of domination rather than genuine welcome. Within this framework, NKDs who diverge from anticipated behavior, such as expressing nostalgia for North Korea or exhibiting cultural distinctiveness, are regarded as posing a threat to this established civilizational hierarchy.

Rooted in *othering* and notions of South Korean superiority, these negative perceptions are compounded by neoliberal values that prioritize individual responsibility and market-based success. As South Korea increasingly embraced neoliberal ideologies, the expectation that individuals should overcome adversity through self-reliance and competition intensified. Consequently, NKDs are viewed through the prism of national division and assessed against neoliberal criteria of productivity and self-sufficiency.

Neoliberal Perspectives on NKDs

In South Korea, neoliberalism has been adopted to boost national competitiveness. This neoliberalism is characterized by three main principles: limited state intervention, expansion of market principles, and the extension of market relations to the public sector. Neoliberalism emphasizes marketization, where competition drives innovation and self-development for companies and individuals. The adoption of neoliberalism in South Korea aimed to restructure the market and individuals to maintain and enhance the state's competitiveness (Ha 2006; Seo and Kim 2013). In this framework, life outcomes are seen as the result of personal choices rather than structural inequalities (S. Park 2009). Consequently, individuals, including NKDs, are viewed as competitors within the capitalist system.

The analysis of video comments revealed that viewers believed NKDs should earn recognition by working hard, with success seen as achievable through effort. Many argued that it was unrealistic to expect an easy life in South Korea, emphasizing that South Koreans faced challenges as well in a competitive capitalist society. Some commenters insisted that NKDs should not receive “unconditional food and shelter” and should work to earn their livelihood, aligning with the belief that only those who work hard can survive in capitalism. These perceptions were intertwined with the viewers' struggles and a view of NKDs as outsiders. Viewers suggested that NKDs who contributed and made an effort could earn respect, while those who did not should be deported.

We are barely making ends meet despite working hard, so why are we giving so many benefits to foreigners? Why should we help them when we are struggling too? They should work. Why is this program even airing?

NKD should take on any job available. If they are stuck in a fantasy like in a drama, that's their mistake. They need to be made to realize this in order to adapt to South Korea's competitive society.

Additionally, viewers mentioned the benefits NKDs received in South Korea,

expressing frustration with the perception that NKDs received ample benefits unavailable to native-born South Koreans. These benefits, such as easy university admission through special admissions, regardless of age or ability, and “free” public housing and settlement payments, were cited as sources of resentment. Viewers felt that the NKDs enjoyed advantages in the competitive capitalist system, which they viewed as reverse discrimination. This was consistent with the neoliberal view that positioned NKDs as competitors. A *New York Times* article that reported the death of an NKD mother highlighted this perspective:

In recent years, helping people who fled North Korea has not been a political priority in the South. The government has focused on improving relations with Pyongyang. And as the economy has stagnated, there has been resistance to increasing subsidies for defectors, with some seeing them as competitors in the tough labor market. (Choe 2019)

These neoliberal perceptions are rooted in South Korea’s broader socioeconomic context. Following the 1997 financial crisis, neoliberal reforms restructured the welfare system to emphasize individual autonomy and market competition over state responsibility. Hence, public perception of NKDs shifted from “recipients of support” to “competitors in the market,” weakening support for welfare policies. Such perceptions extended to some advocating reducing or limiting assistance to NKDs, suggesting that it would be better to help struggling native South Koreans. This dichotomizes NKDs and native-born South Koreans, positioning NKDs as competitors, following the broader neoliberal ethos.

Rather than creating a space for mutual growth and understanding, the neoliberal mindset constrains integration by framing people’s worth in terms of economic contribution. It enforces a standard that NKDs must meet to *earn* their place, diminishing the possibility of conviviality, where NKDs could thrive through mutual support and shared development. This transactional view of hospitality limits NKDs’ opportunities to integrate, perpetuating a dynamic where they are viewed as economic subjects to be *fixed* rather than as people to be welcomed.

Conclusions

South Koreans' perspectives on NKDs can be broadly categorized into three views: a positive view, the lens of othering and South Korean superiority, and a neoliberal perspective. The perception of NKDs as sharing the same ethnic identity is closely linked to the view that NKDs are fellow citizens united with South Koreans by a common bloodline (Choi and Kim 2013). In this study, the viewers who viewed NKDs as South Korean citizens did not regard them negatively. They believed that NKDs should be received with an open mind, free from discrimination. Some acknowledged the hardships that NKDs endured to reach South Korea, expressing support for their integration and happiness in South Korean society. However, NKDs' determination to overcome adversity was considered a crucial driving force for adapting to systems within South Korea.

NKD were positioned within the frameworks of South Korean superiority, neoliberalism, and capitalism as well; hence, they were othered. Comments associated NKDs with North Korea, despite their migration. North Korea is viewed as a criminal state lacking human rights, which has led to NKDs being perceived as either criminals or pitiful figures. Welfare benefits, educational opportunities, and employment opportunities afforded to NKDs have led some South Koreans to perceive these advantages as a form of reverse discrimination, contributing to negative attitudes toward defectors.

Many believed that NKDs must work hard to gain social recognition, and that such efforts would lead to success. Given South Korea's capitalist system of constant competition, many viewers felt that life was equally difficult for South Koreans. The benefits that NKDs received in this competitive capitalist system were seen as reverse discrimination, with NKDs being viewed as competitors from a neoliberal perspective. This led to calls for reducing or limiting support for NKDs, suggesting that it would be more appropriate to assist native South Koreans struggling economically. This dichotomous categorization and the perception of NKDs as competitors are tied to the broader neoliberal ethos of South Korean society.

NKD, coming from an environment in which autonomy was not

required and decisions were made according to the leader's directives, migrated to South Korea, where freedom of choice is guaranteed. However, ironically, they are expected to conform to the established South Korean order and adapt to the neoliberal environment. According to Oh (2011), the primary reason NKDs are regarded as maladjusted is the strong capitalist logic. However, as demonstrated by the results, NKDs are perceived as criminals and as others, distinct from the South Korean population, and remain subject to discriminatory perspectives. Hence, it is difficult to attribute the reasons for defectors not integrating solely to individual capabilities. Researchers argue that fostering mutual respect, rather than passively accepting NKDs, could enhance coexistence (H. Kim et al. 2024).

Based on this study's findings, the first element of hospitality, transboundariness, is somewhat recognized in South Korean society, as some South Koreans are open to accepting NKDs. Many acknowledge the persistence of negative attitudes and discrimination and recognize the need for a shift in perspective. However, online comments also indicated that many natives view NKDs as *others*, maintaining a distinct separation between NKDs and South Koreans. This suggests that equality, and the perception of NKDs as equal and integral members of South Korean society, remains insufficiently developed.

Furthermore, awareness of conviviality appears to be limited. While viewers agreed that NKDs should work to sustain economically within South Korea, this sentiment seemed more driven by resentment over perceived *privileges* than by acknowledgment of NKDs' aspirations and capabilities. Therefore, if South Korean society strengthened its commitment to equality (viewing NKDs as peers) and conviviality (recognizing their potential and fostering reciprocal engagement), attitudes and interactions with NKDs could evolve toward more positive, proactive exchanges.

Recent shifts in South Korea's settlement policies reflect a move away from assimilationist frameworks (Hur 2012) toward models of social integration grounded in mutual respect and participation (Ministry of Unification et al. 2025). While earlier policies positioned NKDs as passive recipients required to adapt to dominant norms, recent approaches emphasize their agency and the value of their experiences. Hence, this study

proposes a practical policy innovation: the establishment of a State-Certified NKD Expertise Accreditation System. This system would recognize NKDs as inter-Korean professionals capable of contributing as unification educators, policy advisors, and cultural mediators. This approach could reframe them as active producers of knowledge, facilitating inclusion into the Korean society and socioeconomic self-reliance.

Educationally, this study proposes a comprehensive educational module on NKD understanding within the national primary and secondary curricula to mitigate the social stigma surrounding NKDs and foster a social sensitivity that embraces diversity. It should include the narratives of NKDs and interactive learning activities (e.g., collaborative projects between South Korean and NKD students), focusing on transforming unification education from abstract nationalism to concrete stories of lived experiences. Through this approach, students would recognize NKDs as fellow citizens, internalizing the ethics of mutual understanding and hospitality.

It is essential to implement programs that promote ongoing community interaction to foster mutual understanding and enhance community cohesion between NKDs and South Korean residents. Cultural exchange activities involving both groups are vital for building mutual trust and bonds. These programs should facilitate the continuous development of relationships (J. Kim and Jo 2019). Such participatory programs are crucial for supporting NKDs' social adaptation and improving public perceptions within South Korean society. Therefore, institutions, such as local Hanawon centers and unification education centers, should organize cooperative programs to encourage mutual understanding and promote social inclusion, advancing the long-term integration of NKDs.

This study is significant in analyzing how neoliberalism and South Korean superiority shape the perceptions of NKDs among South Korean viewers. Previous studies have predominantly focused on South Korean superiority, with few exploring the intersection of neoliberalism and perceptions of NKDs. For example, Christina Choi (2014) indirectly discussed the influence of neoliberalism by examining how strict border controls enforced by North Korea and China maintain the political and economic stability of these states, with North Korean women becoming

targets of human trafficking. NKDs are active agents who navigate the complexities of their situation. Eun Ah Cho (2018) explained that South Korean television programs, targeting domestic audiences, reflect materialism.

However, this study specifically investigates how South Korean perspectives on NKDs intersect with neoliberalism, finding that South Koreans tend to perceive NKDs as individuals who are expected to contribute to South Korean society. This contributes to the neoliberal framework by revealing that the views towards NKDs are not free from that framework. Furthermore, this study introduces the hospitality theory as its theoretical framework and connects it with the research findings and conclusions.

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