

## **U.S. Students' Perceptions of International Teaching Assistants in the Public Relations Field**

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the outcomes of relationships between international teaching assistants and U.S. undergraduate students in the public relations field and whether intercultural communication competence predicts those outcomes. Findings suggest a need for intercultural communication competence in public relations education, not only to achieve better pedagogy but also to better prepare students for public relations practice in an increasingly globalized world.

**KEYWORDS:** Public relations, education, intercultural communication, diversity and inclusion

The U.S. has always been an attractive country for international students because U.S. universities provide high quality education and foreign language improvement that cannot be easily found in their home countries (Yildirim, 2012). In addition, U.S. higher education reflects personal and collective freedom for many international students (Strauss, 2017). Therefore, the number of international students in U.S. higher education has continuously increased over the years. There are now approximately 50% more international students at U.S. colleges and universities than there were a decade ago; the number increased 0.05% in 2018/2019 compared to the prior year (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2019a). International graduate students often receive different funding opportunities when accepted to U.S. universities. They are either funded through the U.S. government, U.S. private sponsors, international organizations, scholarships from their own respective countries, and often supported through employment with teaching assistantship assignments. One of the primary funding sources for international graduate students in U.S. colleges and universities is teaching/research assistantships, but only 36.4% have an opportunity to benefit from this kind of funding (IIE, 2019b). Those who are recruited as teaching or research assistants have a chance to study closely with faculty members and the students of those universities.

International teaching assistants have positive and negative effects on undergraduate students. They can provide global perspectives to students, contribute to international components of the curriculum, and prepare students for the realities of globalization (Haas, 1996; Peterson et al., 1999; Trice, 2003). Every student learns more when their college experience includes people from different backgrounds, and international students make diversity a meaningful educational asset by bringing different perspectives into the class (Strauss, 2017). In a globalized world, international teaching assistants' presence and their relationships

with U.S. students can shape, inform, and correct how they see the world outside of the U.S. (Barker, 2016). Other research, however, suggests that international graduate employees are unable to communicate satisfactorily with undergraduate students (e.g., Alberts, 2008; Clayton, 2000; Borjas, 2000), which may have negative effects on undergraduates' academic performance. Some international teaching assistants may not speak English well enough to have others understand them. Even though their knowledge of the field might be extensive, they may not have the vocabulary to explain issues in depth (Rains, 1983). Today, many universities have created programs to help train international teaching assistants to communicate in English; however, the problem remains (Finder, 2005). Conversely, students may not be willing to adjust to the English language skills of international graduate employees.

Most of the studies about international graduate students focus on their adaptation process to U.S. higher education. Some discuss their social experiences, such as friendship, religious acceptance, and social networks (Moglen, 2017; Nishmin, 2011; Trice, 2004), while others focus on stress and psychological issues (Lee, 2016; Valdez, 1982; Yeh, 1979) and cultural problems (Bresnahan & Chai, 2000; Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Yildirim, 2012). Little is known, however, about U.S. students' opinions of international teaching assistants. For instance, Subtirelu (2017) states that some students believe international graduate students are good at communicating one on one; however, their communication ability may not be good when presenting a lecture to the whole class. In addition, international teaching assistants say that using feedback from undergraduate students could be a beginning point for understanding what should be worked on and what should be changed in terms of their teaching adjustment (Bresnahan & Chai, 2000), and their feedback may also contribute to improving relationships between international teaching assistants and undergraduate students. Moreover, although a

number of studies focus on international graduate students (e.g., Borjas, 2000; Perruchi & Hu, 1995), none examines the field of public relations directly. To fill this gap, this study uses a survey to analyze the outcomes of relationships between international teaching assistants and U.S. undergraduate students in the public relations field and to determine whether intercultural communication competence predicts those outcomes.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Relationship Management Theory**

Ferguson's (1984) conference paper laid the foundations of relationship management theory by emphasizing that public relations should focus on relationships. A number of public relations studies (e.g., Aldoory et al., 2015; Gallicano et al., 2012; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; Waymer, 2013) have used this theory to analyze relationships over the years. Relationship management theory changes the focus of public relations from communication to relationships. The value of public relations comes from building relationships between organizations and their publics (Shen, 2017) and communication contributes to the quality of the relationship (Ledingham, 2006). Moreover, "relationship management is an attempt to define the field in terms of what it is" (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 56).

In addition, the central constructs of relationships in public relations scholarship have changed through the past several years (Ledingham, 2008). For example, Broom and Dozier (1990) focused on the degree of agreement or accuracy of relationships between organizations and their publics. L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, and Ehling (1992) suggested trust and reciprocity as attributes of relationships that can be used to measure the quality of organization's relationships with its publics. Ledingham, Bruning, Thomlison, and Lesko (1997) identified 17 dimensions from other disciplines, such as interpersonal communication and marketing. Later, these dimensions were reduced to five: trust,

openness, involvement, investment, and commitment (Ledingham, 2008). Huang (1997) suggested using four dimensions (control mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction), from which Hon and Grunig (1999) developed a scale to measure relationships, which is now commonly accepted (Waters & Bortree, 2012).

*Control mutuality* is “the degree to which parties agree about which of them should decide relational goals and behavioral routines” (Stafford & Canary, 1991, p. 224). *Trust* means a feeling that parties in the relationship can rely on each other (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). *Commitment* refers to making a decision whether to retain a relationship between parties (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). *Satisfaction* is “the extent to which one party feels favorably toward the other because positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced” (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 20).

These four concepts are derived from interpersonal relationship principles (Ledingham, 2006), and research in interpersonal communication and the psychology of interpersonal relationships indicates that these four concepts are good indicators of successful interpersonal relationships (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Therefore, this study uses these four dimensions (control mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction) to measure the quality of relationships between international teaching assistants and U.S. undergraduate students.

RQ1. How do U.S. undergraduate students perceive their relationships with international teaching assistants in terms of relationship outcomes (control mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction)?

Moreover, this study also argues that there may be some factors that affect how U.S. undergraduate students perceive their relationship with international teaching assistants in terms of relationship outcomes, such as avoiding ethnocentrism and stereotypes or having personal interaction and intercultural communication competence.

### **Intercultural Communication**

Intercultural communication refers to interpersonal communication between people from different cultures (Gudykunst, 2002). In a globalized world, people of different cultures have increasing communication opportunities using expanding technologies. Speaking a different language, however, is one of the greatest obstacles to communication (Novinger, 2001) because cultural differences are seen as a source of misunderstanding and conflict (Xu, 2013). Educational institutions can play an important role in fostering positive intercultural communication because programs that enable intercultural interactions provide opportunities for intercultural learning and encourage intercultural ties between international and local students (Arasaratnam, 2015).

Some factors may improve intercultural communication between international teaching assistants and U.S. undergraduate students. One is that both sides of the relationship need to be objective with each other, avoiding ethnocentrism, stereotypes, and prejudices (Lei & Schnell, 2012). For instance, if international graduate students are seen as responsible for any language problems, then U.S. students are not being taught to respect diversity and are unprepared for cooperative cross-cultural communication (Subtirelu, 2017). Stereotypes often refer to “uniform antipathy towards a social group” (Cuddy et al., 2009, p. 3). Personal interaction between students from different cultures can help break down the stereotypes that are the obstacles to communication, can improve critical thinking, and allow students to create their own references (Usluata, 1997; as cited in Devran, 2010).

Another factor, high intercultural communication competence, helps students develop cultural empathy, communicate with, and have positive attitudes toward people of other cultures (Arasaratnam, 2006). Intercultural communication competence (ICC) in general terms is defined as “the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and

to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts” (Lázár et al., 2007, p. 9). A person who has developed ICC can build relationships with people of other cultures (Byram, 1997). Therefore, if undergraduate students have intercultural communication competence, they may be able to establish relational competence with graduate assistants from different cultures.

The Kozai Group developed Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES) (2011) to evaluate intercultural effectiveness by focusing on three dimensions that each are comprised of two other dimensions: Continuous learning (self-awareness and exploration), interpersonal engagement (global mindset and relationship interest), and hardiness (positive regard and resilience). Self-awareness refers to being aware of people’s values, strengths, weaknesses, interpersonal style, behavioral tendencies, and their effects on other people. *Exploration* refers to being open to understanding other people’s ideas, values, norms, situations, behaviors, and new experiences that can make changes in people’s thoughts and behaviors. It also measures people’s ability to make changes by learning from their mistakes. *Global mindset* is about people’s interest in other cultures and people from other cultures. *Relationship interest* measures people’s willingness to build and maintain positive relationships with people from different cultures. *Open-mindedness* is related to people’s judgments about situations and other people that are new, and measures people’s tendency to avoid stereotypes and be open to different behaviors and groups of people. *Emotional resilience* is related to handling emotional experiences and measures people’s emotional strength level (IES, 2011, pp. 2-6).

H1: U.S. undergraduate students’ degree of self-awareness predicts outcomes of their relationships with international graduate teaching assistants.

H2: U.S. undergraduate students’ degree of exploration predicts outcomes of their relationships with international graduate teaching assistants.

H3: U.S. undergraduate students' degree of relationship interest predicts outcomes of their relationships with international graduate teaching assistants.

H4: U.S. undergraduate students' degree of open-mindedness predicts outcomes of their relationships with international graduate teaching assistants.

H5: U.S. undergraduate students' degree of emotional resilience predicts outcomes of their relationships with international graduate teaching assistants.

### **Method**

This study used a survey to answer the research question and test the links between U.S. undergraduate students' degree of intercultural communication competence and outcomes of their relationships with international graduate students. A pretest was conducted to test measurement validity and reliability. Following IRB approval, the final questionnaire was created and administered to U.S. undergraduate students.

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited from different universities in the U.S. using nonprobability sampling. The author sent several rounds of the online survey link to the Public Relations Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) to increase the response rate. The author also sent the link to colleagues at various universities, after determining they worked with international teaching assistants in their classes. Using multiple modes of contact helped improve the response in the recruitment phase of the survey (Dillman et al., 2014), but the difficulty in reaching the population required also necessitated the use of a convenience sample and makes determining a response rate not possible in this case. By reaching out through instructors, students enrolled in various sizes of public relations classes, such as introductory,



campaigns, and research methods classes, that had international teaching assistants were recruited.

The questionnaire was distributed during class time with the permission of the instructors of those classes. A total of 230 respondents completed the questionnaire. A total of 227 (98.7%) of them studied in public universities, while 3 (1.3%) were enrolled in private universities. A total of 214 (93%) of them call the U.S. home, while the rest were from China, Vietnam, France, Korea, Pakistan, Germany, Italy, and Sri Lanka. Ninety-three (40.4%) of them live in Oregon, 82 (35.7%) in Texas, 32 (13.9%) in California, 6 (2.2%) in Alabama, 5 (2.2%) in Washington state, and 5 (2.2%) in Maryland. There were also 1 to 2 participants each from Oklahoma, Mississippi, New Jersey, Georgia, and Florida. Of the 230 students, 69 (30%) of them had studied abroad, and 196 (85.2%) had traveled abroad. They had different career goals after graduation. Six (2.6%) of them wanted to stay in academia, 107 (46.5%) wanted to work for a public relations agency. Forty-two (18.3%) wanted to work for a global company, while 28 (12.2%) preferred a domestic one. The rest (20.4%) stated that they wanted to work in different areas, such as advertising, politics, business, and finance.

### **Measurements**

The survey first measured U.S. undergraduate students' perceptions of their relationships with international teaching assistants. Following these questions, participants evaluated their feelings when dealing with cross-cultural people and situations, responding to questions that measure their intercultural competence. At the end, demographic questions were asked.

***Relationship Perceptions.*** Following Hon and Grunig's (1999) guidelines to evaluate relationships, this study focuses on relationship perceptions, which implies how one or both parties see the relationship. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure each of the four relationship

quality outcomes: control mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction. *Control mutuality* is related to power (Hon & Grunig, 1999) and in this study, it is conceptualized as the degree of agreement about the power which parties to the relationship have with one another. In this study, *trust* is conceptualized as U.S. students' level of confidence in international teaching assistants (Shen, 2017). *Commitment* measured U.S. students' thoughts about their relationships with international graduate students and whether it is worth spending time and energy to maintain and improve it. This study conceptualized *satisfaction* in terms of students' perceptions and measured students' level of positive feelings toward international graduate students by considering their expectations.

***Intercultural Communication Competence.*** This study used the Kozai Group's Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES) (2011), which was developed specifically to evaluate the competencies critical to interacting effectively with people from different cultures. The author used a 5-point Likert scale to measure the degree of self-awareness, exploration, global mindset, relationship interest, open-mindedness, and emotional resilience.

## **Results**

### **Reliability and Validity of the OPR and ICC measures**

To test the item reliability of the OPR and ICC measures, Cronbach's alpha was used. As indicated in Table 1, Cronbach's alpha values for relationship outcomes are .84 for the four items of control mutuality, .88 for the six items of trust, .84 for the five items of satisfaction, and .81 for the four items of commitment. As shown in Table 2, Cronbach's alpha values for intercultural communication competence are .70 for the three items of self-awareness, .79 for the three items of exploration, 0.71 for the three items of global mindset, .84 for the three items of relationship interest, .72 for the three items of open-mindedness, and .78 for the three items of emotional resilience. The reliability of the OPR and ICC measures were at or above the acceptable level of .70

(Pallant, 2013), although some of the ICC measures were just above the cut-off.

To test the validity of both measures, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted (see Table 1 and Table 2). For the OPR measures, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy value was .94 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity value was significant ( $p < .05$ ). For the ICC measures, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy value was .84 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity value was also significant ( $p < .05$ ). These values were above an acceptable level, which is above .60 (Pallant, 2013). Therefore, the suitability of the data set was confirmed. Factor loadings for each item ranged from .58 to .91. Only one item "in dealing with students like me, international teaching assistants have a tendency to throw their weight around," with .13 factor loading, did not correspond to an acceptable value and was excluded from the data set.

Table 1. OPR Items, Reliability and Factor Loadings

	Item	Mean	Reliability	Factor Loading
Control Mutuality	International teaching assistants really listen to what students like me have to say	3.77		0.81
	International teaching assistants believe the opinions of students like me are legitimate	3.90		0.86
	International teaching assistants and students like me are attentive to what each other has to say	3.77		0.85
	International teaching assistants gives students like me enough say in the decision-making process	3.57	0.84	0.79
Trust	International teaching assistants treat students like me fairly and justly	4.03		0.83
	Whenever international teaching assistants make an important decision, I know they will be concerned about students like me	3.67		0.75
	International teaching assistants can be relied on to keep their promises	3.75		0.86

	I believe that international teaching assistants take the opinions of students like me into account when making decisions	3.79		0.82
	I feel very confident about international teaching assistants' skills	3.71		0.79
	International teaching assistants have the ability to accomplish what they say they will do	4.07	0.88	0.75
Commitment	I feel that international teaching assistants are trying to maintain a commitment to students like me	3.75		0.80
	I feel that international teaching assistants want to maintain relationships with students like me	3.57		0.79
	There is a bond between international teaching assistants and students like me	3.13		0.84
	Compared to other teaching assistants, I value my relationship with international teaching assistants more	2.93	0.81	0.76
Satisfaction	I am happy with international teaching assistants	3.80		0.84
	Both the international teaching assistants and students like me benefit from the relationship	3.42		0.72
	Most students like me are happy in their interactions with international teaching assistants	3.59		0.83
	Generally speaking I am pleased with the relationship international teaching assistants have established with students like me	3.70		0.82
	Most students enjoy dealing with international teaching assistants	3.08	0.84	0.72

Table 2. ICC Items, Reliability and Factor Loadings

	Item	Mean	Reliability	Factor Loading
Self-awareness	I can easily describe my interpersonal style to others	3.84		0.80
	Thinking about my strengths and weaknesses is a good use of my time	3.83		0.78
	Usually I can tell what impact my behavior has on others	3.98	0.70	0.78
Exploration	I treat all situations as an opportunity to learn something	3.86		0.78

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	I have developed significant new skills over time	4.28		0.88
	I learn from mistakes	4.20	0.79	0.86
Global Mindset	I routinely read, watch, or listen to international news	3.11		0.81
	My friends would say I know a lot about world geography	2.83		0.80
	Every now and then I seek out information about other countries and cultures	3.75	0.71	0.78
Relationship Interest	I'm interested in meeting people from other cultures	4.35		0.86
	I like to figure out why people do the things they do	4.29		0.86
	Getting to know people teaches you valuable things	4.44	0.84	0.90
Open-mindedness	I can always find something good in any situation	3.73		0.88
	My friends would say I always look on the bright side of things	3.66		0.91
	If I were lost, someone would probably stop and help me	3.65	0.72	0.58
Emotional Resilience	It doesn't take me a long time to get over a particularly stressful experience	3.15		0.84
	I find that little things don't bother me	2.82		0.81
	I'm good at coping with negative emotions	3.25	0.78	0.85

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### **Relationship Perceptions**

Results indicate that U.S. undergraduate students generally have good relationships with international teaching assistants. To answer RQ1, which asked how U.S. undergraduate students perceive their relationship with international teaching assistants in terms of relationship outcomes (control mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction), each relationship outcome was addressed separately.

Most participants in this study indicated a high level of agreement with the amount of control mutuality that they experience

with international teaching assistants. Their level of agreement on the four measures ranges from 53% to 72.2% (Agree and Strongly Agree on a 5-point Likert Scale). The largest agreement measured was for “international teaching assistants believe the opinions of students like me are legitimate” ( $M = 3.9, SD = .8480$ ). The other three measures indicated somewhat less agreement about control mutuality: international teaching assistants really listen to them ( $M = 3.8, SD = .9066$ ), are attentive to what each other say ( $M = 3.8, SD = .8585$ ), and give them enough say in decision-making processes ( $M = 3.6, SD = .8969$ ).

Most respondents also indicated a high level of trust in their relationships with international teaching assistants. Their level of agreement on the six measures ranges from 58.7% to 81.3%. The highest measure was obtained for “international teaching assistants treat students like me fairly and justly” ( $M = 4.0, SD = .7698$ ), with over 80% agreement. The second highest measure was “international teaching assistants have the ability to accomplish what they say they will do” ( $M = 4.0, SD = .8565$ ) with 79.6% agreement. Four other measures [“Whenever international teaching assistants make an important decision, I know they will be concerned about students like me” ( $M = 3.7, SD = .8433$ ), “I feel very confident about international teaching assistants’ skills” ( $M = 3.7, SD = .9745$ ), “International teaching assistants can be relied on to keep their promises” ( $M = 3.8, SD = .7731$ ), and “I believe that international teaching assistants take the opinions of students like me into account when making decisions” ( $M = 3.8, SD = .8038$ )] have more than 55% agreement.

Participants indicated a lower level of agreement (18.2% to 64.4%) in terms of the amount of commitment they experience than with the other relationship outcomes. Two measures were below 50% agreement. One, “compared to other teaching assistants, respondents value their relationship with international teaching assistants more” ( $M = 2.9, SD = .8588$ ), had 18.2% agreement. The other, “there is a bond between

international teaching assistants and respondents” ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $SD = 8818$ ), had 30.9% agreement. The greatest level of agreement (64.4%) was recorded for the statement “I feel that international teaching assistants are trying to maintain a commitment to students like me” ( $M = 3.7$ ,  $SD = 8289$ ), followed by “I feel that international teaching assistants are trying to maintain a relationship to students like me” ( $M = 3.6$ ,  $SD = 9444$ ), with 54.8% agreement.

The percentage of agreement (34.9% to 69.2%) with satisfaction measures was lower than the percentage agreement for the control mutuality and trust measures. Similar to commitment, two measures of satisfaction were below 50% agreement: “Most students enjoy dealing with international teaching assistants” ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $SD = 9680$ ), with 34.9% agreement, and “both international teaching assistants and students like me benefit from the relationship” ( $M = 3.4$ ,  $SD = 8765$ ). The highest satisfaction measure was “Most students like me are happy in their interactions with international teaching assistants” ( $M = 3.6$ ,  $SD = 8859$ ). Two of the measures [“Generally speaking I am pleased with the relationship international teaching assistants have established with students like me” ( $M = 3.7$ ,  $SD = 9305$ ), and “I am happy with international teaching assistants” ( $M = 3.8$ ,  $SD = 8736$ )] recorded more than 60% agreement.

### **Relationship Perceptions and Intercultural Communication Competence**

To test the research hypotheses that assumed a significant relationship between U.S. undergraduate students’ degree of intercultural communication competence and outcomes of their relationships with international graduate teaching assistants, a multiple regression was conducted. Multiple regression helps to identify significant independent variables, and researchers can remove non-significant variables from the analysis (Pallant, 2013). It appears that exploration and relationship

interest are statistically significant predictors of control mutuality, as shown in Table 3. The first variable (exploration) made a moderate contribution to the model, with a .18  $R^2$  value. The second variable (relationship interest) is added for the final model, but this variable made a much smaller contribution. The  $R^2$  increased by only .5. Overall the model accounts for 23% of the variance in control mutuality. These two variables have positive coefficients, which means that more positive exploration and relationship interest increases positive control mutuality. In addition, in the final model, exploration had a higher beta value ( $\beta = .42, p < .01$ ) than did relationship interest ( $\beta = .22, p < .01$ ), which means that exploration had more of an effect than did relationship interest.

Table 3. Summary of Regression Analysis for Variable Predicting Control Mutuality

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	B	SE B	$\beta$	B	SE B	$\beta$
Exploration	0.42	0.06	0.42*	0.22	0.08	0.22*
Relationship Interest				0.31	0.08	0.31*
$R^2$		0.18			0.23	
F		49.75*			34.48*	

\* $p < .01$ .

Table 4 summarizes the regression analysis results for variables predicting trust. Self-awareness, exploration, and relationship interest were statistically significant for predicting trust. As indicated in Table 4, when self-awareness was added to the equation it made a substantial contribution to the overall model fit, with a substantive  $R^2$  value of .21. The second variable (exploration) was added to the model, but this variable made a smaller contribution ( $R^2$  increased by .7). The third variable, relationship interest, was also added to arrive at the final model. This variable also made a much smaller contribution than other variables ( $R^2$  increased by .4). All of the variables have positive coefficients, which



means that more positive self-awareness, exploration, and relationship interest increase trust toward international teaching assistants. In the final model, self-awareness shows a more marked effect than the other variables, with the highest beta value ( $\beta = .46, p < .01$ ).

Table 4. Summary of Regression Analysis for Variable Predicting Trust

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SE B	$\beta$	B	SE B	$\beta$	B	SE B	$\beta$
Self-awareness	0.46	0.06	0.46**	0.27	0.07	0.27**	0.18	0.07	0.18*
Exploration				0.32	0.07	0.32**	0.19	0.08	0.28**
Relationship interest							0.28	0.08	0.28**
R <sup>2</sup>		0.21			0.28			0.32	
F		61.03**			44.16**			35.42**	

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

As shown in Table 5, only exploration was a statistically significant predictor of satisfaction. The other intercultural communication competence dimensions (self-awareness, global mindset, relationship interest, and open-mindedness) were not significant predictors of satisfaction. Exploration made a moderate contribution, with an  $R^2$  value of .17. In addition, exploration has positive coefficients, which means that being more open to understanding other people's ideas, values, norms,

Table 5. Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Satisfaction

Variable	Model 1		
	B	SE B	$\beta$
Exploration	0.42	0.06	0.42*
R <sup>2</sup>		0.17	
F		47.99*	

\* $p < .01$ .

situations, and behaviors increases the level of satisfaction in U.S. undergraduate students' relationships with international graduate assistants.

As indicated in Table 6, similar to satisfaction, only exploration was a statistically significant predictor of commitment. Exploration made a moderate contribution to variations in commitment ( $\beta = .37$ ), with a  $R^2$  value of .13. It also has positive coefficients, meaning that more positive exploration means more of a feeling of commitment in students' relationships with international graduate assistants.

Table 6. Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Commitment

Model 1			
Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$
Exploration	0.37	0.06	0.37*
$R^2$		0.13	
F		35.79*	

\* $p < .01$ .

The models support the hypothesis that U.S. undergraduate students' degree of intercultural communication competence, specifically with regards to exploration, predicts outcomes of their relationships with international graduate teaching assistants. Moreover, the first two models demonstrate that U.S. undergraduate students' willingness to build and maintain positive relationships with people from different cultures are significantly related to their perceived relationships with international graduate teaching assistants, specifically with regards to control mutuality and trust. Also, self-awareness is related to U.S. undergraduate students' confidence in international graduate teaching assistants.

### Discussion

Because the number of international students has continuously

increased over the years in U.S. higher education, it is important to know U.S. students' perceptions of them. Therefore, this study analyzed the outcomes of relationships between international teaching assistants and U.S. undergraduate students in the public relations field. The quantitative findings suggest that U.S. undergraduate students generally have good relationships with international teaching assistants.

U.S. undergraduate students are happy with the amount of control mutuality in the relationship, which is about the power distribution they experience with international teaching assistants. They do not appear to have issues with international teaching assistants' decisions about relational goals and behavioral routines. They believe that international teaching assistants listen to them, give them enough say in decision-making processes, and believe their opinions to be legitimate, which are significant factors in the teaching and learning process (Blau, 2011). Even though international graduate assistants would appear to be the empowered ones in this relationship, it is interesting that U.S. undergraduate students do not seem to have any issues with this power distribution. International graduate students may be using their power not to have control in their relationships with undergraduate students but to instead give students enough say and listen to their opinions. When students believe that they are taken seriously and treated as important participants in conversations, they feel motivated to participate in their education. If instructors insist on having control in educational relationships, students will not be considered valuable participants (Cook-Sather, 2002). Therefore, it is important to provide students opportunities to utilize their qualities. Because U.S. students believe that international teaching assistants care about them and are happy with the amount of control mutuality, the outcome can affect their learning process positively.

Trust is one of the significant aspects that influences student learning (Kim, 2018) because a student's confidence level in the instructor

affects course performance (Jaasma & Koper, 1999). Findings indicate that U.S. students have a high level of confidence in international teaching assistants, which can also have positive effects on U.S. students' course performance. They believe that international teaching assistants are fair and just, will do what they say they will, and can do what they say they will. Most students believe that international teaching assistants are trying to maintain commitment and a relationship with them. However, more than half of the participants are neutral about their relationship with international teaching assistants compared to non-international ones. They may have the same feelings about teaching assistants, whether they are international or not. Therefore, future studies should analyze U.S. undergraduate students' perceptions of non-international graduate teaching assistants in order to compare their perceptions with international graduate teaching assistants.

The majority of students are happy with their relationships with international teaching assistants, and they have positive feelings toward international graduate students based on their expectations. Some of them, however, do not enjoy dealing with international teaching assistants. Previous studies (e.g., Clayton, 2000; Borjas, 2000) indicate that U.S. undergraduate students frequently complain about the language proficiency of international teaching assistants. Even though U.S. undergraduate students are generally happy in their relationships with international teaching assistants, it might be better to consider language proficiency as a serious issue, not only for U.S. students but also for international teaching assistants, and expand programs to enhance the ability of international teaching assistants to speak English and teach in U.S. classrooms.

Findings indicate that exploration was a significant predictor of U.S. students' relationships with international teaching assistants. Being open to understanding other people's ideas, values, norms,

situations, behaviors, and new experiences plays an important role in the relationships between U.S. students and international teaching assistants. This study also found that relationship interest was a significant predictor of control mutuality and trust. Therefore, if U.S. students are willing to build and maintain positive relationships with international teaching assistants, they are more accepting of the power that international teaching assistants have in this relationship. In addition, they will have confidence in their relationships with international teaching assistants. Another significant predictor of trust was self-awareness, which indicates that being aware of international teaching assistants' values, strengths, weaknesses, interpersonal style, and behavioral tendencies also plays an important role in U.S. undergraduate students' confidence in their relationships with international teaching assistants.

These findings indicate that if U.S. undergraduate students have higher ICC, especially exploration, relationship interest, and self-awareness, they can establish relational competence with graduate students from different cultures, which is significant in the learning process. Similar to previous studies (e.g., Place & Vanc, 2016; Pompper, 2005), this study also emphasizes that it is necessary to increase intercultural competency in public relations education. Because the number of international students has continuously increased in U.S. higher education, their relationships with U.S. undergraduate students play a significant role in their education. Increasing intercultural competency in public relations education may help students to understand other cultures. Moreover, some studies (e.g., McKiernan et al., 2013) indicate that students who have classes related to cultural competence reduce their fear of other cultures, want to learn more about other cultures, and feel that they have become more tolerant to immigrants.

In addition, increasing intercultural competency in public relations education not only helps U.S. students' learning processes during their

education but also helps them when they enter the public relations field as public relations practitioners. One of the important duties of today's public relations practitioners is to communicate and manage relationships with diverse and multicultural publics in a globalized world (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2009). As the Commission on Public Relations Education report (Turk, 2006) emphasized, "practicing public relations internationally and not just locally has become a requirement, not an option." (p. 42). Some studies suggest, however, that U.S. public relations industry and educational approaches are heavily stressed around the world, yet the U.S. public relations curriculum focuses on ethnocentric values rather than having a global and cultural focus (e.g., Bardhan, 2003; Freitag & Stokes, 2009; Toth & Sison, 2011). Therefore, this study recommends Intercultural Communication as a mandatory class for public relations programs in the U.S., which can include collaborative research with other cultures and institutions; having guest speakers from other cultures; analyzing cultural information through authentic videos; attending cross-cultural activities, such as Chinese New Year, Holi, art festivals, and Obon and Taiko festivals; and analyzing non-US international companies' practices instead of U.S. companies' practices abroad. Learning more about other cultures can also lead students to learning more about their values and society as well. Besides having classes that focus on intercultural competences, undergraduate programs can offer summer abroad programs or initiatives and support international education experiences, such as international internships, international field research opportunities, and participation in international events in order to enrich students' experiences.

The Commission on Public Relations Education (Turk, 2006) report indicated that knowledge about multicultural and global issues and skills for applying cross-cultural sensitivity should be taught in an undergraduate public relations curriculum, and global concepts must be integrated throughout the curriculum. Therefore, this study suggests that

having classes focus on intercultural competence can help students to have this knowledge and skills and prepare them for the public relations industry that addresses issues related to diversity and multiculturalism in today's world.

This study was limited to U.S. undergraduate students in the public relations field. Therefore, the findings of the study cannot be generalized to other undergraduate students. Scholars may consider applying this study's framework to other fields. In addition, a convenience sample was used, therefore, the findings cannot be generalized. This study also suggests that future studies need to analyze U.S. undergraduate students' perceptions of non-international graduate teaching assistants in order to compare their perceptions with international graduate teaching assistants. In addition, future studies could expand other measures of effective education such as cultural tolerance, other competencies, Hofstede's cultural dimensions, and students' satisfaction with learning or understanding. Future research encompassing interviews with U.S. undergraduate students in the public relations field could add depth to these findings by garnering insights into students' lived experiences with international graduate teaching assistants and could analyze the differences in perception of public relations students at different seniority levels. Despite these limitations, there is still much to learn from these results.

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