



# What attracts people to parks: a case study of a U.S. and South Korean park

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## **ABSTRACT**

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With the increase in urbanization, green spaces are becoming fewer and fewer within cities. This study focuses on two types of parks in two different cultures, a world apart. One in Seoul, South Korea, and the other in Nashville, TN, USA. These comparisons will help to spotlight what makes the parks unique and why these two parks are used by the citizens of these two different countries. Data was gathered from the existing literature through surveying five people in each country. The results indicate there are many similarities between the two countries related to why people go to these parks, but there are also differences. Studying these differences may help to create green spaces suitable for visitors in each country.

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# 1. Introduction

With rapid population growth, there has been an increase in urbanization resulting in green spaces becoming smaller and less available in Metropolitan areas. This study is analyzing green spaces found within these large cities. However, these cities have very different cultures and are in different countries. It will ask questions like, what attracts people to metropolitan parks? This overview will be conducted in metropolitan areas in the U.S. and South Korea, and it will be comparing the reasons behind why people go to these parks.

Park quality is a crucial aspect of a community's attractiveness. This is especially true if that community is in a multi-family living, or high-rise urban environment, where there is a lack of serenity, social intermingling, and environmentally and socially stimulating community parks and green spaces. Parks and green spaces can offer the community many socially rewarding benefits. These benefits can include the reduction of stress and improved mental health (CDC 2022). Furthermore, these spaces can be utilized to benefit and improve citizens' fitness by stimulating outside activities, whether working out in a park or walking on the sidewalk portion of the greenway.

In understanding both areas, preliminary research was conducted on the two city parks under investigation in this study. The research revealed that the green space per capita was 17 square meters for Seoul and 5360 square meters per capita for Nashville (Golden 2021; Stacker, 2022). This spotlighted a stark contrast between the two cities. However, this does not necessarily mean that national parks and green spaces in Nashville, Tennessee, are of better quality than the ones found within Seoul, South Korea. This showcases the fact that Seoul has less available land to work with on a per capita basis.

Looking into the recent modernization in Seoul, South Korea, and focusing on the environment, this showcases the fact that the city planners and designers had a responsibility to design quality green space in a city filled with skyscrapers and high-rise neighborhoods. During the review, the paper will showcase one park that utilized beauty, environmentally positive green assets and appreciation of green spaces near those neighborhoods with plenty of shade and seating for visitors.

With different cultural expectations in the U.S., there are many different features and types of city parks and green spaces. There can be simple parks found within suburbs and other smaller parks within the city neighborhoods that are grand and well-known to the population, like Central Park in New York City. However, many of these green spaces in the U.S. can be seen exhibiting both a lack of environmentally pleasing design and lacking reasonable maintenance. The problem in the U.S. is becoming quite acute and is being questioned by the environmentally aware population (Lakhani 2020). The National Park Conservation Association (NPCA) has addressed this problem Through Congressional investments, "we have made big strides to address our parks' deferred maintenance problems, but it's clear that our parks need more support" (NPCA). Seoul, being a big metropolitan city, may face those issues as well.

Reviewing two different cultures, there can be a variety of positive and informative facts that can be learned from each other's parks and green spaces. This research hopes to discover the cultural differences that are showcased within South Korean parks and compare them to U.S. parks. Not only understanding cultural differences but what attracts people to visit these parks. Within this research, we want to evaluate and understand that the U.S. is not alone in finding environmentally conscious needs in its parks. This comparison might identify that both countries

are doing things positively and well as some things are not appropriate. With a better understanding of both countries' objectives, they can potentially take some inspiration from each other. Each country can be fully environmentally and socially realized, enjoyed by its visitors, as well as by the surrounding community.

This comparison (Seoul Parks to U.S. Parks) can be shown implicitly by looking at Seoul Forest and comparing it to the author's hometown park in Nashville, TN, "Centennial Park". In addition, the study can incorporate the perspective of the residents found within two different cities and two different cultures.

This research will also analyze another study, in the form of a literature review, to spotlight the environmentally sensitive residency, (population density), of Seoul with a detailed, introspective review of how the unique system of parks and green spaces is developed, planned, and brought to fruition. The main focus of the review will be showcasing several personal opinions on numerous factors found within these green spaces. Korea has modernized within the last 70 years. With this modernization was it able to enhance, improve, and support the parks and green spaces found within Seoul, today?

The questions moving forward are: What attracts people to parks in the US vs. Seoul, South Korea? Are these two parks creating a system of green spaces that are projecting a positive image, with environmentally sustainable importance within the communities and a social/cultural collaboration, conservancy, and quality?

## 2. Literature review

The objective of this study is to determine the differences in cultures and what attracts people to parks within their society. This review is intended to spotlight how parks and green spaces in this East Asian city can showcase beneficial qualities provided to the population of Seoul, and once these beneficial qualities are understood is it possible to transfer those social and cultural results within communities that are potentially suited for them in the U.S.

### 2.1 Why are parks important?

The study focuses on the research conducted by Chisun Yoo and Sugie Lee. This can potentially create social and environmental benefits that have a similar effect on many cities in the U.S. However, many U.S. cities lack the financial infrastructure and focused maintenance support to keep neighborhood parks in a beautiful, appealing, and usable state of enjoyment for their citizens. During the pandemic, U.S. metro areas realized that many communities lacked green spaces and park access (Withrow 2021). While other communities with parks and green spaces found their spaces underdeveloped, and not appealing to visitors, or in keeping with the mindset that parks and green spaces are important for our mental health (Caver, Masterton, and Parkes 2020). We need to make sure that everyone can benefit from the natural environment in our communities. Maybe by incorporating some of the design and planning ideologies of this Southeast Asian City, we could improve the environmental satisfaction of U.S. citizens, by finding ways to combine the same ideologies of Seoul's green spaces, a city of skyscrapers, where they still find channels to incorporate green space and parks into their communities, into U.S. communities.

Parks can and should be vital, life-enhancing open spaces that residents and visitors enjoy. This exploration will show multiple factors that include proper shading, desirable greenery, enhanced social attraction, and social interaction within parks while spotlighting the environmental needs and benefits of the community. The essence of this analysis will ultimately showcase how the population of Seoul feels toward green spaces within the mega-city of Seoul.

The importance of researching and examining the benefits of parks and green spaces in a different city, in a different country, or of a different culture will reveal how other societies utilize green spaces to benefit their communities. This understanding will provide lessons learned that can potentially be realized and applied in the cities in the United States. Currently, in many U.S. cities, parks suffer from a lack of public funding and government-supported maintenance. The question that must be addressed is: “How and why is this the case in this major, economically wealthy Nation?” Is there a lack of planning, exploration, and sustainability of distinct social and cultural needs for green infrastructure? We need to improve the research, practical design, and layouts with improved maintenance of parks, utilizing some of the same factors found in a densely populated city like Seoul. As cities become more densely populated and as they increase their concern regarding the impact of the uptick of climate change; planners, elected officials, and community advocates are taking a fresh look at parks and green spaces for their potential to help in addressing critical urban infrastructure and public health issues. The need to enable people to choose smaller and/or attached housing types in exchange for neighborhood amenities (Steuteville 2021). Parks are now recognized as powerful tools for urban communities and local economies (Wagoner 2019). A simple example of these factors is the quantity and layout of benches in most Seoul Parks.

Understanding how park funding works within the United States, is research that will help focus on how the developers of Seoul South Korea think of the social sustainability factors in urban planning. This understanding will help us to better understand the results of the survey conducted for this study.

## 2.2 The study of Yoo and Lee

Reviewing the specific research conducted in Seoul, “data set(s) consisted of responses from my questionnaire survey completed by 500 respondents” (Yoo and Lee, 2016, pg. 1) this data gives a wide range of information throughout the process. The respondents came from the city of Seoul and its surrounding areas. It hoped to address how the public felt about social sustainability and its green spaces within the city. The survey consisted of several questions that pertained to factors found within these green spaces and parks.

## 2.3 What is the rating system?

They contain questions regarding accessibility to green spaces, sports facilities, maintenance, safety from crime, air quality, trust in neighbors, and a sense of belonging to name a few. The respondents would rate the questions on a scale from 1-5. One equates to very bad and five to very good. Found in the figure below, the information depicts the image of this scale.



Figure 1. Scale for social sustainability factors.

### 2.4 The location of the study

The data below represents the area in which the study was conducted. This showcases the city of Seoul and its surrounding areas with the resultant information. It spotlights the population of not only native South Koreans but also foreigners. Furthermore, it looks at the total population and the area.

	Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Total Population	Aged Population (65+ Years Old)		Resident Population		Foreign Population	
			Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Seoul city	605.25	10,369,067	1,239,431	11.95	9,550,206	92.10	415,059	4.00
Study area (total)	66.63	1,480,135	181,008	12.23	1,376,022	92.97	58,880	3.98
Seungdong-gu	16.86	303,777	37,162	12.23	288,316	94.91	12,399	4.08
Gwangjin-gu	17.06	377,204	39,469	10.46	355,483	94.24	20,187	5.35
Dongdaemun-gu	14.21	376,329	51,559	13.70	336,529	89.42	17,871	4.75
Jungnang-gu	18.50	422,825	52,818	12.49	395,694	93.58	8423	1.99

Figure 2. Location of respondents.

### 2.5 Social sustainability factors in urban planning in Seoul

Within the range of the data, the table below spotlights some of the variables that were surveyed. These variables include air quality, safety from crime, natural environment, maintenance, sports facilities, and accessibility to parks or green spaces. The data showcases the number of people who responded in each category from one to five. Then it took the mean and standard deviation of the data results. One of the most surprising results showcased was accessibility to parks or green spaces. It showed the most positive results within the survey period with a score of 3.57, which leans towards somewhat positive results. This is surprising because the green space per capita as stated previously is much lower than in other areas, especially related to Nashville Tennessee. Even with this lower per capita area available, the green space that South Korea is offering to the city of Seoul is having a positive influence on its citizens. Furthermore, most other results showed a moderate to somewhat good result. The only results that show negativity were air quality and a sense of belonging, which is not depicted in the graph below. These two areas of concern somewhat make sense because of the metropolitan cityscape. The air quality is the result of high-density living quarters. This can be found within most cities with millions of people living within a small area. Furthermore, because of the dense cityscape, it can create difficult social interactions. However, it is very positive that this research showcases the accessibility to green space and facilities that the citizens enjoy.

Table A3. Cont.

Latent Variables	Variables	Category	Count	%	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Perceived environment	Air quality	Very bad	49	10.12	2.7	0.91	1	5
		Somewhat bad	136	28.10				
		Moderate	218	45.04				
		Somewhat good	72	14.88				
		Very good	9	1.86				
	Safety from crime	Very bad	16	3.31	3.1	0.82	1	5
		Somewhat bad	82	16.94				
		Moderate	237	48.97				
		Somewhat good	137	28.31				
		Very good	12	2.48				
	Natural environment	Very bad	18	3.72	3.2	0.91	1	5
		Somewhat bad	75	15.50				
		Moderate	214	44.21				
		Somewhat good	146	30.17				
		Very good	31	6.40				
	Maintenance	Very bad	17	3.51	3.09	0.84	1	5
		Somewhat bad	83	17.15				
		Moderate	240	49.59				
		Somewhat good	127	26.24				
		Very good	17	3.51				
Accessibility to public sport facilities	Very bad	18	3.72	3.29	0.94	1	5	
	Somewhat bad	68	14.05					
	Moderate	193	39.88					
	Somewhat good	164	33.88					
	Very good	41	8.47					
Accessibility to parks or green spaces	Very bad	13	2.69	3.57	0.96	1	5	
	Somewhat bad	48	9.92					
	Moderate	146	30.17					
	Somewhat good	202	41.74					
	Very good	75	15.50					

Figure 3. Social sustainability factors in urban planning in Seoul, South Korea.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Question

The purpose of this study is to look at two different parks found in two different cultures. The parks are located in Seoul South Korea and Nashville, Tennessee. The study is conducted to determine and understand the reasons behind people visiting each of these parks. The question that is being asked is: What attracts people to Centennial Park and to Seoul Forest? This examination could potentially showcase many unique factors that result in enticing more people to visit parks both within the United States as well as parks in South Korea and get more benefits from those visits.

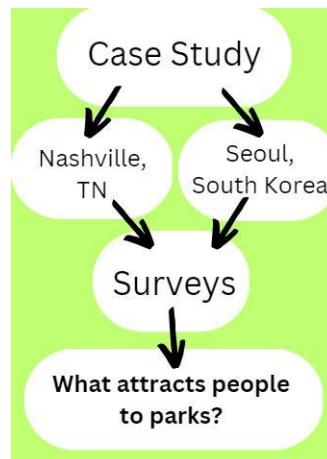
#### 3.2 Methods

This study relied on a survey conducted in Nashville, Tennessee, and Seoul, South Korea. Two parks are chosen as case studies: Centennial Park in Nashville and Seoul Forest in Seoul. The survey contained a list of 10 questions soliciting answers on the reasons behind why people are attracted to these parks. The questions are listed as followed (1) where are you from, (2) what



is your age, (3) what is your occupation, (4) how long have you been living in the area, (5) why do you come to this park, (6) when did you start coming to this park, (7) what is your favorite feature about this park(why?), (8) is there anything you would want to change about this part, (9) how does this park compare to other parks you have visited in the last month, and (10) would you recommend this park to others?

The surveys were sent out to five residents currently living within these metropolitan areas. This was done to attempt to understand current perceptions about the parks. Furthermore, all the questions remain the same for both surveys related to both parks. This helped to ensure equal representation of data throughout each of these parks to attempt to maintain consistency. This methodology can be summed up in the figure below.



(Figure 4. Methodology Graphic)

### 3.2 Justification

With green spaces becoming fewer and fewer, this study attempts to understand how to develop parks so that more people can derive benefits from them.

## 4. Results

The results are represented in two Tables below. The green table represents Centennial Park and the responses to the survey. The second table showcases the results of the Seoul Forest found in Seoul, South Korea. The results showcased answers like “compared to parks in Europe, it's less lively, less loud, less colorful” and “in Japan, there are so many buildings and not much about green” for the response of how this compares to other parks you've visited in the last month within the Seoul survey. For Centennial Park, the answers that were given were” spacious and clean” and “the large space and the diverse activities” available. Furthermore, many responses for the favorite feature of the park in Centennial Park was the Parthenon. The park also focused on the socialization aspect of hanging out with friends. While the results for Seoul showcased results focusing on peacefulness and nature.

Survey questions (Centennial Park)	Respondent 1	Respondent 2	Respondent 3	Respondent 4	Respondent 5
Where are you from? (US)	Nashville, TN	Nashville, TN	Buffalo, New York	Albany, NY	Nashville, TN
What is your age?	22	23	23	78	58
What is your occupation?	Student	College student	Consultant	healthcare administrator	Student
How long have you been living in Seoul	20 years	23 years, since I was born	20 years	19 years	18 years
When did you start coming to Seoul Forest?	To hangout and spend time outside	I like to hang out with friends there, and walk the dog.	To visit the Parthenon	parthenon	It's about a four minute walk from my house. My dad use to walk my stroller there as a baby and I can't count how many days and nights I've spent there, dancing, lounging on the grass, walking around the Parthenon. It's a beautiful hub in Nashville, and a great place to bring out of towners.
Why would you go to Seoul Forest?	6yrs old	Since I was born basically	in 2003	19 years ago	21 years
What is your favorite feature about this park? Why?	The Parthenon	The Parthenon	The Parthenon	feeding the ducks, Parthenon, and green space	The Parthenon
Is there anything you would want to change about this park? Why?	Add more kid friendly activities	I would like more to be done with the pond. It seems like an afterthought despite how big and close to the Parthenon it is. Maybe an art installation or boats?	Gardening and Maintenance	better parking	Free admission to go inside the Parthenon and see Athena, at least for Tennessee residents. And more tall trees! They cut down a lot and I miss the whole park being enclosed by a leafy curtain.
How does this park compare to other parks you have visited in the last month?	Spacious and clean	It's a nostalgic place, but there are parks that appeal more to me in my college area, like Promontory Point, which is along Lake Michigan and has bonfires and lush trees.	It is larger, but poorly maintained	the large space and diverse activities available	Well it'll just always be the most special and familiar to me—it's an extension of my yard. I have countless memories there.
Would you recommend this park to others?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Figure 5. Centennial Park survey data.

Survey questions (SeoulForest)	Respondent 1	Respondent 2	Respondent 3	Respondent 4	Respondent 5
Where are you from? (Country)	Britain	Korea	Japan	Malaysia	USA
What is your age?	41	22	22	21	22
What is your occupation?	Professor	student	student	student	student
How long have you been living in Seoul	19 years	22	5 months so far	1 year	6 months
When did you start coming to Seoul Forest?	Years ago	I think it was like a year before	2022 Sep	Last year autumn	6 months ago
Why would you go to Seoul Forest?	Because it's close and for a long time, greenery	For a chill date maybe	Beautiful view	Taking a relaxing walk	for a nice walk and for the food
What is your favorite feature about this park? Why?	Proximity to my house	The peaceful nature	Nature ! So Beautiful and I can relax	The environment makes me feel at peace	The pond
Is there anything you would want to change about this park? Why?	I would like it to be free - encourage people to express themselves more, have fewer rules	Maybe adding up some animals and zoo would be nice and exciting	Korean traditional cafe in Seoul forest Because people can experience Korean cultures while they are looking at Beautiful view	Not much tbh	More lighting for the park
How does this park compare to other parks you have visited in the last month?	Compared to parks in Europe, it's less lively, less loud, less colourful	I've been to Olympic Park and they're much bigger but if ure wanting to see various kinds of plants Seoul forest would be better	In Japan, there are so many buildings and not much about green	Hmm it's close to where I live so it's hard to beat	I think that it has more things to do around the park and the amount of parking
Would you recommend this park to others?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Figure 6. Seoul Forest survey data.

## 5. Discussions

What attracts people to parks in the U.S. versus Seoul South Korea? This is the question that the study sought to answer. The biggest findings within the survey were the difference between the social aspects found in Centennial park and the peacefulness found in Seoul Park. The people in Centennial Park found that they visited the park for socialization factors such as meeting with friends and doing physical activities. Seoul forest showcased the people enjoyed getting away from society and being surrounded by immense plant life and peacefulness found within nature.

### 5.1 Respondents and Surprises

Reviewing the data, Seoul Forest respondents provided a wide variety of responses. These respondents are people currently living in Seoul, South Korea. They were originally from the following countries The U.K., Malaysia, Japan, South Korea, and the U.S. These respondents offered a range of answers with a unique variety. The most surprising responses came from the

comparison Seoul Forest to their home country parks or other parks that they recently visited. It is surprising to see that some responses indicated that their home countries' parks were better and did not compare to Seoul Forest. One person stated there were fewer visitors in Seoul Forest than in most European parks, *"Compared to parks in Europe, it's less lively, less loud, less colorful"*. While one response stated this, another response praised Korean parks. This response is: *"In Japan, there are so many buildings and not much about green."*

## 5.2 Seoul Forest Features

When visiting Seoul Forest, it is always very lively with what seemed to be lots of visitors. However, the study found that most people agreed that the park has a sense of peacefulness. It is a place where people can just walk around and sit in peace and quiet. This can be seen through a variety of seating options found in the shade of the park. Furthermore, the natural scenery throughout the park, as well as the immense variety of plants, offer a greater view of nature in this metropolitan city. Not only that there is a bridge that visitors can walk across and look at the pond. The most notable feature are the park benches. These benches contain quotes of famous South Korean people. A couple of benches actually have quotes from the popular Korean group known as BTS. The picture below is from the artist G-Dragon a famous Korean singer.



Figure 7. Seoul Forest park benches.

## 5.3 Café Culture

South Korea has a huge cafe culture. Visitors can find many cafes in many areas around the city. They are frequently used as workspace areas, for meeting friends, and for a variety of just being relaxed, sitting down, and getting a cup of coffee. Not only that but cafes are also themed to give increased incentives to visit so many of the cafes, for example, The Cat Café. Another such cafe near the park is called Teddy's Oven. A homey cafe that serves coffee, tea, and a variety of baked goods themed around their mascot a teddy bear. They give free fortune cards, which sometimes involve the park.

## 5.4 Centennial Park's prominent feature

One of the most prominent features in Centennial Park in Nashville is the exact replica of the Parthenon in Greece, built for the Centennial Exposition celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of Nashville (The Parthenon n.d.). So, what was interesting related to those respondents to the

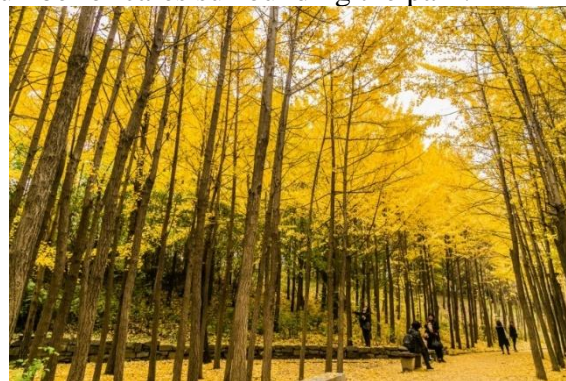
Centennial Park survey was their representation of how important the Parthenon was to the park. The building contains a replica of the statue of Athena. This replica stands over all visitors and fits within the 93feet long building. This structure and the building are used as the landmark in the middle of the park. It is used as the important selling point of the park and clearly from the responses it looks like it is serving its purpose. Furthermore, there are other key features of the park. There are walking trails and a pond.



Figure 8. The Parthenon in Centennial Park.

### 5.5 What brings you to the park?

Another response that was surprising was the reason why people like going to the park. Many responses gave the answer of hanging out with friends. An opposite response, from South Korean responders related to Seoul Forest. It seems Centennial Park is “activity-oriented,” while people in South Korea visit the park for some peacefulness and communing with nature. This can be seen by the figure below of a pathway in Seoul Forest. It feels as if you're walking as the name implies in a forest full of greenery (Trippose n.d.). Both parks have their own issues, as well as things that people would like to add to the park. In Centennial Park, people wanted more shade in the park, and the existing shade was better maintained with more activities for kids. Seoul Forest showcases the need for more lighting, maybe a bigger park compared to the other parks in Seoul. Another point in the survey was adding a cafe to the park. This is surprising because of the immense number of cafes surrounding the park.



(Figure 9. Seoul Forest Walkway)

### 5.6 Comparison to other studies

The United States people enjoy going to parks to “provide gathering places for families and social groups” as the main factor (EKU n.d.). This can be seen in the data conducted here within Centennial Park. However, looking into research for South Korea was a bit difficult. There was

no accredited site that did research on why people go to parks in South Korea? Further research showcased the prominence of nature found within South Korean parks. That people visited to get away from the metropolitan cities. This is also similar to some of the results of peacefulness and nature within this study.

## 6. Conclusions

Knowing that parks can be found throughout the world is merely the very tip of the iceberg. There are unique differentiations between parks, which create interest and greater appreciation for them. The generation of interest can happen because of the national culture displayed within the park setting, or geographic features, as well as unique natural design choices made by the planner(s). This study compared and contrasted people's perceptions of parks in the US and South Korea by interviewing five residents in Nashville Tennessee, and five residents in Seoul South Korea. The residents in Nashville went to parks primarily for social and cultural reasons while the residents in Seoul went to parks to enjoy the peace and quiet found within nature.

Centennial Park (Nashville, TN) was utilized more for meeting up with friends that might do an activity either in the park, (i.e., like visiting the huge structure in the middle of the park known as the Parthenon), or to gather and visit one of the restaurants near the park. While in the Seoul Forest (South Korea) is geared toward a more peaceful setting, more solitary, away from the big, bustling city. While both parks are visited for different activities, it is hard to speculate which park is a superior park.

The study was not intended to showcase superiority, but rather to focus on how the parks can be planned and used based on people's culture and needs. Not all parks should be focused on activities or just provide walking trails. Every park has its unique place, and everyone who visits the park helps to shape the experience. Rural parks might want something different and urban parks will attempt to support more urban values. This diversity identifies that in some cultures individuals prefer serenity and beautiful surroundings or maybe they reflect more on nature and simplicity. At the same time, another park becomes a place for joining friends and associates sharing activities or walking and just doing some enjoyable sightseeing. It is important that both the U.S. and South Korea can learn from each other. The experience of the Parthenon in Nashville helps bring in more and more visitors to visit a replica of an ancient temple, while in Seoul the cafes and restaurants surrounding the park summon those interested in gastric enjoyment either before or after a visit to the Seoul Forest. Both parks can find a place within each of their country's cultures. There are lots of limitations within the study in both the variations in the parks and the number of people available to respond to the surveys in the condensed timeframe.

## 7. Limitations

There are limitations within the experiment that was conducted. First, the survey was conducted with individuals from a variety of different areas in South Korea. If this survey was to be conducted again, the survey should add several questions to gain a wider variety of responses and increase the number of questionnaires to increase the number of respondents. Next would be to visit South Korea and go back to the park and get survey responses from a variety of people

not only visitors from abroad but individuals, who have lived in South Korea their entire life. It would be beneficial to have their thoughts regarding their park and see if they visited any other parks in any other countries. While in Nashville this survey should be conducted again to receive a wider variety of responses from both people living in Nashville and visitors. Doing this will bring a broad range of information that can help understand the complexities and the features that bring individuals into parks. Furthermore, there is one question that would have been perfect for this survey that was not included. The question of safety is found within each of the parks. This question might have shown some more differences between the two cultures.

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