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Soft Power and Applicant Attraction to Prospective Employers

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Abstract

Attracting highly qualified talent is a crucial activity for the success of organizations. We hypothesized that soft power of countries or regions, i.e. political influence and media exposure, are related with applicant attraction to prospective employers. Survey results of more than 2,200 respondents from Korea, China, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore show that applicant attraction varies across countries and depending on the country-of-origin of the prospective employer. Regression results indicate that soft power predicts applicant attraction to Japanese or Western organizations suggesting the importance of soft power in international business.

Keywords: applicant attraction, Asia, image theory, Japan, recruiting, soft power

Introduction

Attracting high-quality applicants is a critical component of staffing (Chapman et al., 2005; Ehrhart & Ziegert, 2005; Rynes & Barber, 1990) and can be a competitive advantage (Turban & Greening, 1996). Recent changes in the nature of work, demographics, and increased internationalization of business present many challenges for attracting talent (Ployhart, 2006). In some countries, talent has already become scarce so that firms have to compete in a “war for talent”. Recent studies indicated that competition for highly qualified talent is particularly intense in Asia (Han & Froese, 2010; Wattson Wyatt, 2003). For instance, in China, the demand for job candidates with technical skills, relevant work experience and who speak English has rapidly increased that firms pay salary premiums of up to 100% to poach such people from competitors (Han & Froese, 2010).

Despite the increased globalization of business, research has lagged behind in investigating the consequences of international business on recruitment and applicant attraction. Major multinational enterprises (MNEs) such as the Japanese electronics company Sony and the American consumer goods company Procter & Gamble employ more than 60% of their workforce outside their home countries. Anderson and Witvliet (2008) showed that personnel selection practices and applicants’ perceptions thereof differ greatly across countries. MNEs may need to modify their recruitment practices if they do not want to lose out in the global war for talent.

Foreign-based companies might be less preferred employers in overseas markets (e.g., Newburry, Gardberg, & Belkin, 2006; Robinson, 2003), because they usually suffer from the liability of foreignness, that is disadvantages due to their foreignness and lack of local market knowledge (Zaheer, 1994). Newburry et al. (2006) found that demographic factors, such as race

and gender, interacted with the attractiveness of foreign-based companies in the United States. Turban, Lau, Ngo, Chow, and Sic (2001) found that Chinese university students were more attracted to foreign companies when the students were more risk and money oriented. Kopp (1994) and Yoshihara (2005) argued that Japanese companies were less preferred employers in overseas due to ethnocentric HR (Human Resource) policies. However, demographics, personality traits, and HR policies could only explain little variance of why local candidates were (not) attracted to foreign-based employers.

Ployhart (2006) argued that demographics and job-organizational characteristics have become less important in today's knowledge-based, globalized economy, while images have become more important. Several studies conducted in the US and Europe confirmed the importance of corporate images (Highhouse et al., 1999; Highhouse, Thurnbury, Little, 2007; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Froese, Garrett, and Vo (2010) extended the concept to country images and an Asian context. Their findings showed that Vietnamese students were more attracted to American companies than to domestic companies because of images of technological advancements and open-mindedness associated with the US. While these studies have improved our understanding of the role of images in applicant attraction, prior research has been inconclusive (Highhouse, Brooks, Greguras, 2009) and paid little attention to international aspects (Froese et al., 2010).

We extend the growing body of research on images and recruiting in international context by investigating the role of soft power in applicant attraction to prospective foreign-based employers in Asia. Soft power is a well-known construct in political science referring to the ability to obtain what one wants through co-optation and attraction (Nye, 1990). Given the well-documented importance of co-optation and attraction in international politics, the

concept of soft power is likely to also have an effect on applicant attraction to foreign employers. We provide more rationale in the following section. This study is – to our knowledge – the first to introduce soft power into the domain of human resource management and international business.

This paper is structured as follows. The next section briefly reviews recruitment literature, introduces soft power, and develops the study's hypotheses. The third section describes the methodology and the fourth section presents the empirical findings. In the final section, we discuss the findings and provide practical implications and avenues for future research, while acknowledging the limitations of this study.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Recruitment encompasses the organization's efforts to identify, attract, and influence the job choices of qualified applicants (Ployhart, 2006). Recruitment can only be successful if the organization can attract a sufficient pool of applicants. Thus, applicant attraction is not only a source for competitive advantage but also critical for organizational survival (Taylor & Collins, 2000). Reflecting the important role of applicant attraction, there are several excellent reviews on applicant attraction (Chapman et al., 2005; Ehrhart & Ziegert, 2005; Ployhart, 2006).

Responding to the growing need to better understand job applicants, this study focuses on the perspective of potential job applicants (Chapman et al., 2005; Ehrhart & Ziegert, 2005). Ehrhart and Ziegert (2005) identified three overarching metatheories that help explain applicant attraction: environment processing metatheory, interactionist processing metatheory, and self processing metatheory. Environment processing metatheory deals with how the actual and perceived environment shapes applicant attraction. Interactionist processing metatheory deals

with fit between individuals and organizations. Self processing metatheory relates to how individuals deal with information about themselves. As this study, intends to investigate how soft power of different countries (external environments) affect applicant attraction, we adopt an environment processing theory.

Within environment processing metatheory, Ehrhart and Ziegert (2005) emphasize the important roles of signaling theory (Rynes, 1991; Spence, 1973) and image theory (Highhouse et al., 1999; Lindquist, 1974). According to signaling theory, applicants do not have complete information and interpret available information as signals, e.g. advertisement brochures emphasizing work-life balance. Image theory has gained wide popularity in recent years (for a review see Highhouse et al., 2009). According to image theory, applicants decide among different job alternatives by considering how these alternatives fit their image of what is desired. This area of research has an interdisciplinary character and was originally developed from marketing literature (e.g. Collins & Stevens, 2002; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Highhouse et al., 2009; DelVecchio et al., 2007). While early research was limited to corporate reputation and brand equity (Collings & Stevens, 2002; Gatewood, Growan, & Lautenschlager, 1993; Highhouse et al., 1999), Lievens and Highhouse (2003) developed a more comprehensive model distinguishing between instrumental and symbolic images. Instrumental images refer to objective attributes directly related to the job or organization, e.g. pay, firm size, whereas symbolic images refer to subjective feelings and perceptions towards the employer. While Lievens and Highhouse (2003) conceptualized symbolic images as corporate identities, Froese et al. (2010) conceptualized symbolic images as country images of technological advancement and open-minded people. Both studies show that symbolic images can predict applicant attraction above and beyond instrumental images of job characteristics and demographics suggesting the

important role of images. However, the components of symbolic images are not well understood (Highhouse et al., 2009). In addition to corporate identities and country images, Highhouse et al. (2009) argue that corporate social responsibility, public relations and advertisements are key components that shape symbolic images. We propose that soft power can be an important component of symbolic images that can help explain applicant attraction to foreign-based employers.

The concept of “soft power” was proposed by Joseph Nye in 1990, and is defined as the ability to obtain what one wants through co-option and attraction. Soft power can be contrasted with ‘hard power’, which has historically been the predominant realist measure of national power, through economic size, military forces, or a nation’s gross domestic product. Hard power can execute its imperative through force and coercion. Soft power can be wielded not just by states, but by all actors in international politics, such as NGOs or international institutions, and perhaps also recruiting organizations. Hard power is tangible and can be easily measured in numbers, whereas soft power is more a subtle measure or images as perceived by people. Nye (2005) argues that soft power is more than influence, since influence can also rest on the hard power of threats or payments. And soft power is more than just persuasion or the ability to move people by argument, though that is an important part of it. It is also the ability to attract, and attraction often leads to acquiescence. According to Nye (2005), the primary currencies of soft power are an actor's values, culture, policies and institutions. Moreover, these “primary currencies”, as Nye (2005) calls them, are able to attract or repel other actors to "want what you want". Therefore, soft power represents an additional behavioral way of getting desirable outcomes.

This paper strives to connect recruiting with the concept of soft power. The effect of soft power in international politics has been well documented in recent years (Nye 2005; Melissenm

& Lee 2011; Heng 2010; Miller 2009). Whereas hard power can be likened with instrumental images, soft power seems closely related with symbolic images because soft power is more of subjective and general nature. Soft power as a part of symbolic images may also execute influence on international business and applicant attraction to foreign-based employers specifically. We propose hypotheses related to two central components of soft power: political influence and media exposure.

Japan, the US and Europe have enjoyed tremendous economic and political influence in Asia. European countries have long traditions of trade with and economic investments in Asia. For instance, the Dutch East India Company sent almost a million Europeans to work in Asia and shipped more than 2.5 million tons of merchandise between Europe and Asia in the 17th and 18th centuries. The US concluded influential military and economic development agreements with many Asian countries after the end of the Second World War. Even though Japan's political power decreased after the Second World War, Japan emerged as the first industrialized country in Asia holding the Tokyo Olympics in 1960s and the Osaka Expo in 1970. This drastic economic growth has appealed to other Asian developing countries. Mahathir bin Mohamad, the prime minister of Malaysia, proposed the "Look East policy" in 1981 to follow the Japanese economic growth model. These political and economic influences may as well brought about Japanese and Western influence to other Asian countries, given that politics, economics cannot be isolated from social influences. Not only economic success but also Japanese values of motivation and determination may have appealed to people in other Asian countries. Politically suppressed people in developing countries in Asia may also cherish Western values of "democracy" or "freedom". Through these various means, Japan and the West have had strong influence in Asia. Exposed to such influences people may create positive images towards those

countries. Froese et al. (2010) showed that country images had positive spillover effects to organizational attractiveness towards companies from those countries. Likewise, positive image related to political influence may also attract people to work for companies from those countries.

Countries do not only disseminate soft power through political influence but also through other means. Media is commonly identified as an important pillar in today's political arena that executes strong influence on public opinion (e.g. Mc Combs & Maxwell, 1972; Page, Shapiro & Dempsey, 1987). Further, Nye (2005) pointed out that media influence of a certain country is significant to get global acceptance for the country. Western media is widespread across Asia. For example, BBC and Hollywood movies are available almost anywhere in Asia. Willnat et al. (2002) found that US media exposure had a strong influence on values of Asian students. Japanese cartoons (anime) are widespread across Asia like Walt Disney cartoons in most Western countries. Thus, many Asians are exposed to Japanese culture from a young age. Prior studies showed that Japanese media influence such as popular culture has been globally accepted and attracted many people in Asia in particularly (Otmazgin 2008; Iwabuchi 2002, 2010). Movies could even increase tourism to a specific country (Beeton, 2006; Connell, 2005). According to contact hypothesis (Allport, 1958; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), the more exposure people have to a certain object the more they are attracted to it. This implies that the more Asians are exposed to Japanese and Western media, the more they are attracted to that country or region. If they are more attracted to those countries they might also be more attracted to work for companies from that country. In a related study, Moon (2008) found that media exposure and cultural values predict attitudes towards certain business model. In conclusion, we assume that political influence and media exposure assert influence on applicant attraction to companies from certain countries. We propose the following more specific hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a: Political influence from Japan is positively related with applicant attraction to Japanese organizations.

Hypothesis 1b: Political influence from Western countries is positively related with applicant attraction to Western organizations.

Hypothesis 2a: Japanese media exposure is positively related with applicant attraction to Japanese organizations.

Hypothesis 2b: Western media exposure is positively related with applicant attraction to Western organizations.

Methodology

This study was part of a large research project. Data are derived from the Global Comparative Survey on Attitudes among Asian Students. The survey was administered by Global Institute of Asian Regional Integration of Waseda University in Japan in 2008. The purpose of this survey was to clarify the scope and content of lifestyles, political attitudes, values and consumption patterns in Asia. Data were collected from approximately 2,400 university students from six Asian countries: South Korea, China, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, and Philippines. Professional research agencies were recruited to collect 400 questionnaires in each country. We only analyzed respondents who selected domestic, Japanese, or Western organizations as their first choice employer resulting in a final sample of 2,208 (usable response rate = 92%). To avoid any misunderstandings and prevent fatigue of respondents, questionnaires were filled out during face-to-face interviews. International students and graduate students were excluded from the sample. We set quota to have an equal distribution of gender (50% female),

academic year (25% freshmen, sophomore, junior, senior each), and major (sciences versus humanities/social science, 50% each) in each country. The average age of respondents was 20.59 (SD = 1.59).

Measures

Main variables. The dependent variable applicant attraction was measured through the following question: “Which company or organization would you like to work for most?” Respondents could choose between domestic company or organization, Western, Japanese, other Asian, or other and were asked to tell the name of the country or region. We used the same questions as in Asia Barometer to measure political influence and media exposure (Inoguchi 2009). We assessed political influence by the general question “Do you think the following countries have a good or bad influence on your country?”. Respondents answered the same question for different countries and regions, including Japan and Western countries, and answers were coded on a Likert-scale from 1 (bad influence) to 5 (good influence). To measure media exposure, we asked “How often are you exposed to TV programs, movies and animation produced in the following countries?” Again, respondents answered the same question for different countries / regions and their frequency of consumption was coded from 1 (almost every day) to 6 (never).

Control variables. Given that prior research found that demographics and job characteristics may affect organizational attractiveness (for a review see Chapman et al., 2005), we controlled for age, gender, academic year, major, and job characteristics. Age and academic year were measured in years. Gender (0 = male, 1 = female) and major (0 = science, 1 = other) were dummy coded. Job characteristics were measured by three items reflecting preference for

extrinsic job characteristics by applicants taken from Froese et al. (2010). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.67, indicating acceptable reliability.

Results

Table 1 provides an overview of respondents' employer choice. Preferences for domestic, Japanese, and Western employers varied significantly across country (Pearson chi-square = 189.06, $df = 10$, $p < 0.001$). In China and South Korea, domestic companies were the preferred choices (60.7% and 62.5% respectively), while Western companies came in second (36.9%, 35.6%), and Japanese employers were avoided (2.4%, 1.9%). In the other countries, foreign employers, in particular Western companies enjoyed popularity among university students. Japanese companies were popular in Thailand.

Table 1: Overview of employer choice across countries

Country		Choice of employer			Total
		Domestic	Japanese	Western	
South Korea	Count	230	7	131	368
	% within country	62.5%	1.9%	35.6%	100.0%
China	Count	232	9	141	382
	% within country	60.7%	2.4%	36.9%	100.0%
Vietnam	Count	153	52	152	357
	% within country	42.9%	14.6%	42.6%	100.0%
Thailand	Count	109	89	172	370
	% within country	29.5%	24.1%	46.5%	100.0%
Philippines	Count	152	55	165	372
	% within country	40.9%	14.8%	44.4%	100.0%
Singapore	Count	150	43	166	359
	% within country	41.8%	12.0%	46.2%	100.0%
Total	Count	1026	255	927	2208
	% within country	46.5%	11.5%	42.0%	100.0%

The means, standard deviations, and correlation of variables are depicted in Table 2. The highest correlation was between age and academic year ($r = 0.59$, $p < 0.001$), reflecting the fact that senior students are usually older than freshmen. There were several more significant correlations, though all were at lower levels, e.g. significant correlation between Japanese influence and Japanese media exposure ($r = 0.13$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 2: Means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations of variables

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Age	20.59	1.97	1									
2 Gender	0.50	0.50	-0.14	1								
3 Academic year	2.43	1.10	0.59	0.00	1							
4 Major	0.49	0.50	-0.02	0.18	0.01	1						
5 Extrinsic job characteristics	3.41	0.47	-0.08	0.07	0.00	0.18	1					
6 Japanese influence	3.71	1.09	0.00	0.00	-0.03	-0.01	0.06	1				
7 Western influence	3.44	1.14	0.10	-0.02	-0.03	-0.05	0.05	0.31	1			
8 Japanese media	3.83	1.41	-0.09	-0.10	-0.05	-0.03	0.03	0.13	0.02	1		
9 Western media	3.83	1.41	-0.09	-0.10	-0.05	-0.03	0.12	0.13	0.02	0.03	1	
10 Japan company dummy	0.10	0.30	-0.03	-0.03	0.02	-0.05	-0.02	0.17	0.03	0.15	0.03	1
11 Western company dummy	0.38	0.48	-0.03	0.06	-0.02	0.00	0.10	0.04	0.08	-0.03	0.16	-0.26

Note: 0.05 < r correlation is significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed), 0.06 < r < 0.08 correlation is significant at 0.01 level, 0.09 < r correlation is significant at 0.001 level (2-tailed)

To test the hypotheses, we conducted multinomial regression analysis because the dependent variable is of categorical nature. As we are interested in the effects of soft power on applicant attraction to companies from different countries we used respondents who selected domestic companies as the reference group. Overall, the model is able to explain application attraction well: Cox & Snell Pseudo R Square = 0.17, Nagelkerke = 0.20, -2 Log Likelihood = 3821.8, Chi-Square = 403.3, $df = 28$, $p < 0.001$. Japanese influence (beta = 0.44, $p < 0.001$) and Japanese media exposure (beta = 0.34, $p < 0.001$) are positively related to attraction to Japanese companies, providing support for hypothesis 1a and 2a. Furthermore, these two variables have the highest Wald-values among all relevant variables indicating strong predictive power. Western influence (beta = 0.14, $p < 0.01$) and Western media exposure (beta = 0.34, $p < 0.001$) are positively related to attraction to Western companies, providing support for hypothesis 1b and 2b. Western media was particularly strongly related to attraction to Western companies (Wald = 52.47).

In addition, several control variables were significantly related to applicant attraction. Corroborating descriptive findings, Japanese companies were less preferred employers in Korea and China, and Western companies were also less preferred in Korea, whereas Western and Japanese companies enjoyed higher applicant attraction in Thailand. Extrinsic job characteristics was only related to Western companies (beta = 0.52, $p < 0.001$) suggesting that job applicants expect and emphasize higher pay and advancement opportunities in Western companies. Major was negatively related to Japanese employers (beta = -0.33, $p < 0.05$) implying that science majors liked Japanese companies. Female students liked Western companies better (beta = 0.35, $p < 0.001$).

Table 3: Results of multinomial regression analysis

	Japanese companies			Western companies		
	B	S.E.	Wald	B	S. E.	Wald
Control variables						
Age	0.00	0.08	0.00	0.03	0.05	0.40
Gender	0.18	0.16	1.25	0.35	0.10	12.22 ***
Academic year	0.05	0.11	0.19	-0.10	0.07	2.22
Major	-0.33	0.16	4.37 *	-0.11	0.10	1.41
Job characteristics	0.02	0.17	0.01	0.52	0.11	20.83 ***
Korea dummy	-1.87	0.44	18.39 ***	-0.35	0.17	4.12 *
China dummy	-1.28	0.44	8.48 ***	-0.20	0.21	0.93
Vietnam dummy	0.23	0.27	0.76	-0.23	0.18	1.66
Thai dummy	1.01	0.29	12.45 ***	0.42	0.20	4.61 *
Philippines dummy	0.14	0.38	0.13	-0.14	0.24	0.37
Soft power						
Japanese influence	0.44	0.10	19.63 ***	0.05	0.06	0.97
Western influence	0.04	0.07	0.27	0.14	0.05	9.63 **
Japanese media	0.34	0.06	29.22 ***	-0.07	0.04	3.20
Western media	-0.09	0.07	1.50	0.34	0.05	52.47 ***

Notes: Reference group = domestic companies, Cox & Snell Pseudo R Square = 0.17, Nagelkerke = 0.20, -2 Log Likelihood = 3821.8, Chi-Square = 403.3, df = 28, p < 0.001

Discussion

This study is – to our knowledge – the first that applied the soft power concept to international business and human resource management. We argued that soft power can be considered as a component of symbolic images (Highhouse et al., 2009; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Prior research indicated that symbolic images can predict applicant attraction above and beyond demographics and job-organization characteristics (Froese et al., 2010; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). The empirical findings indicate that soft power, as measured by political influence and media exposure, has significant impact on applicant attraction. Respondents who perceived a

positive political influence from Japan and had more Japanese media exposure were more attracted to Japanese prospective employers. The same relationships held true for Western influence, Western media exposure, and Western employers. Thus, the findings contribute to a better understanding of symbolic images and applicant attraction in an international context. Furthermore, the findings suggest the important role of soft power in the recruiting context and potentially in other international business domains, e.g. tourism, sales of merchandise products.

The findings also provide several additional contributions to a better understanding of recruiting in Asia and recruiting of foreign-based companies. This large-scale, multi-country survey revealed that preferences for companies from certain countries vary considerably across countries. Whereas Western and Japanese companies were preferred employers in Thailand, Japanese companies were disliked in China and Korea. The soft power concept could only partially account for these results. Historical animosities (Klein, 1998), ethnocentrism (Kopp, 1994), liabilities of foreignness (Zaheer, 1994), differences in job-organization characteristics (Pudelko & Harzing, 2007), and emerging successful domestic MNEs (Han & Froese, 2010) might explain why such differences exist. For instance, the findings suggest that Western companies are preferred by some applicants because they are considered to offer higher pay and better promotion opportunities (Han & Froese, 2010; Ono, 2007). In contrast, Japanese companies have been argued to limit career opportunities of host-country employees (Kopp, 1994). Asian female applicants may also value Western companies because they expect more gender egalitarianism, in contrast to the general trend of traditional roles in most Asian countries (Hofstede, 2001). Science students seem to prefer Japanese companies, given the fact that Japanese companies are well-known for their engineering excellence.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study point to several managerial recommendations and policy implications. First, some countries might pose easier or more difficult environments for companies from certain countries to recruit talent. If the acquisition of talent is one of the main priorities for companies, e.g. setting up R&D (Research & Development) facilities, companies might carefully choose the ‘right’ country. Surveys can reveal where companies may enjoy a country-of-origin advantage or disadvantage and make corresponding location choices. For instance, results of this study showed that job candidates in China and Korea might be less interested in working for Japanese companies. Thus, *ceteris paribus*, Japanese companies are advised to source talent in other countries, e.g. Thailand. If companies suffer from a country-of-origin disadvantage, they should hide their national origin or try to disassociate themselves from their country-of-origin.

Second, as political influence has substantial influence on organizational attractiveness and potentially to a host of other important outcomes, e.g. tourism, governments are advised to manage political influence wisely. For instance, the Japanese prime minister should consider carefully whether visiting Yasukuni-shrine, a shrine to worship Japanese war heroes and upsets Koreans and Chinese, is that important and outweigh potential detrimental business-related outcomes.

Third, given the influence of media exposure on organizational attractiveness, companies and governments should sponsor home-country originated media in overseas to promote their country. Furthermore, companies could use and promote such expenditures as corporate social responsibility in their home countries and abroad. By doing so, companies could enjoy the double positive effects from more media exposure and corporate social responsibility activities.

Fourth, Western companies were preferred in anticipation of better pay and promotion opportunities. Japanese companies may consider doing likewise to reduce the attractiveness advantage of Western firms in overseas. The same logic would hold for gender egalitarianism in the workplace. If such changes are implemented, Japanese companies should also promote their improved job characteristics and gender equality on the job.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

While this study has explored new grounds, several improvements could be made to further increase our understanding of the role of social power in applicant attraction and other domains. First, this study has demonstrated the importance of soft power on applicant attraction. We believe that soft power could also have impacts on other outcomes, such as tourism and sales of merchandise products. Future studies may determine how and to what degree soft power influences various business-related outcomes.

Second, we collected data from more than 2,200 respondents across six countries. Such large-scale surveys are expensive and difficult to coordinate. However, all studied countries were located in Asia. Soft power might have stronger effects in Asia given the collective and harmony-oriented culture (Hofstede, 2001) and the political dependence on other countries. Future studies may analyze the role of soft power in other regions and countries.

Third, we combined US and Western Europe into one category as Western influence. Although Americans and Europeans might want to protest against this clustering together, such clustering is common among Asians. For instance, Japanese call this cluster '*ou-bei*' and Chinese use the term '*ou-mei*'. The other way around, it is common for Americans and Europeans to

speak about ‘Asians’ and ‘Asia-Pacific’, despite pronounced differences within these regions. Nevertheless, future studies might want to further distinguish between different countries.

Fourth, political influence and media exposure were measured only by single items. Single items can have the same predictive validity as multiple-item scales (e.g., Berkvist & Rossiter, 2007; Wanous, Reichers, and Hudy, 1997). Nevertheless, future studies may develop multiple-item and multi-dimensional scales to better understand the content of political influence and media exposure. This may show which type of media exposure has stronger impact or is only of periphery importance.

Fifth, the cross-sectional design of this study might have biased the results. Images and soft power might have stronger impacts on applicant attraction in the early stage but the strength of the relation might weaken at later stages of the recruiting process. Longitudinal studies could further substantiate our findings and increase our understanding. Moreover, soft power is subject to sudden changes, e.g. sudden political conflicts, scandals. Future studies may want to explore the effects of such events on soft power and its outcomes.

Sixth, all respondents were university students from prestigious universities. Such a sample might not be representative for initial job seekers as companies do not only recruit people from elite universities. However, major foreign firms prefer to recruit from such top universities. Future studies may also investigate applicant attraction of more mature applicants and those who are currently holding jobs and compare the results (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Lievens, 2007).

Finally, given that all responses were collected from the same persons, findings might be affected by common-method bias. Different question types, i.e. Likert-scale and categorical, have reduced counter common-method bias. Furthermore, questions concerning the dependent and independent variables were separated in the questionnaire by more than 40 other and

completely unrelated questions. Thus, it is unlikely that respondents could anticipate any connection between these items. Future studies may try to collect data from other sources, e.g. soft power assessed by nation-wide polls. We hope that this article inspires other researchers to further investigate the role of soft power in business.

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