

The Impact of National and Individual Characteristics on Students' Employer Choice

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Abstract

A powerful employer image is claimed to contribute to sustainable competitive advantage by attracting highly skilled employees. However, previous research considers employer image in a domestic context only, although international companies increasingly face the challenge of recruiting employees worldwide. In order to understand the impact of different cultural backgrounds and demographics on job seekers' perceptions of what constitutes an attractive employer, we conduct a multilevel analysis incorporating 90,944 students from 18 countries. Even though between-country differences result not as large as expected, we find significant influence of national culture and economic development on students' importance ratings regarding the key employer image facets promotion opportunities and professional development. Our findings provide managers and researchers with insights on the degree of standardization versus adaption of the employer brand in a pan-European context.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Research; Human Resources Management; Employer Image; Employer Branding; Recruitment; Applicant Attraction; Multilevel Analysis

1 Introduction

The increasing globalization of business activities forces companies to recruit highly skilled employees from all over the world. Attracting and retaining qualified, independent, mobile, internationally marketable candidates is thus a critical feature of globalization (Sutherland, Torricelli, and Karg (2002)). However, demographic and social factors limit the supply of such workers (Björkman and Lervik (2007); Taylor (2005)), while worldwide demand for skilled employees appears likely to continue increasing (Chambers et al. (1998); Mahroum (2000)). The resulting growing competition for the best candidates thus has become a "war for talent" (Boudreau and Ramstad (2007); Chambers et al. (1998); Michaels, Handfield-Jones, and Axelrod (2001)).

To win the war and attract and retain qualified employees, companies must differentiate themselves from their global competitors through a unique and attractive employer image (Knox and Freeman (2006)). International companies face an additional challenge of attracting their often very diverse target groups (Cappelli (2008a, 2008b); Collings and Mellahi (2009); Lewis and Heckman (2006)), which requires an understanding of the impact of different national settings and individual demographic characteristics on candidates' notions of what constitutes an attractive employer (Berthon, Ewing, and Hah (2005)). The concepts of employer attractiveness, organizational attractiveness, and employer image appear in various research streams, including applied psychology (Collins (2007); Collins and Stevens (2002)), vocational behavior (Soutar and Clarke (1983)), management (Gatewood, Gowan, and Lautenschlager (1993)), marketing (Ambler (2000); Ambler and Barrow (1996); Ewing et al. (2002)), and communication (Bergstrom, Blumenthal, and Crothers (2002)). Several studies indicate a strong influence of employer image on perceived employer attractiveness and job seekers' application intentions (Chapman et al. (2005); Gatewood, Gowan, and Lautenschlager (1993); Knox and Freeman (2006); Lemmink, Schuijf, and Streukens (2003); Lievens, van Hoye, and Schreurs (2005); Slaughter et al., (2004); Turban (2001)).

However, most studies are situated in a domestic context, leaving research on employer attractiveness in a cross-cultural context scarce (Tarique and Schuler (2010)). Hence, we lack information about whether international companies should adapt their employer branding strategies to different cultural or individual environments or rely on a global brand positioning (Caligiuri (2010)). To address this question, we must determine if the subjective importance of employer image facets varies across countries and, if so, which influences explain such variation. We therefore theoretically investigate and empirically analyze the extent to which job seekers' evaluations of selected image facets differ across countries. As the employer image is a complex construct and consists of a multitude of facets, the scope of this paper only permits a sound and detailed discussion of selected features of the employer image with regard to the particular research questions we are addressing. Therefore, we have decided to focus on the opportunities for promotion and professional development offered by employers, since these two characteristics have repeatedly been found to be most important for students when evaluating factors contributing to employer attractiveness (Lievens and Highhouse ((2003)); Lievens, van Hove, and Anseel ((2007)); Sutherland, Torricelli, and Karg (2002)). By analyzing nationally and individually determined variation within students' importance evaluations, we help employers decide if a global employer brand positioning with regard to these key image facets is feasible.

By combining brand equity reasoning and findings from recruitment research with results from cross-cultural research and theory, we uncover which influences contribute to explaining variance in job seekers' evaluations of promotion opportunities and professional development. In particular, we consider how country-level characteristics, such as cultural and economic indicators, or individual-level characteristics, such as job seekers' field of study or gender, might influence attribute importance ratings. To test our hypotheses, we apply hierarchical linear modeling to a multilevel model that reflects data collected in a large-scale, European survey of 90,944 respondents in 18 countries. We integrate micro- and macro-level predictor variables in a single model and thereby respond calls for greater applications of multilevel techniques in cross-cultural research (e.g., House et al. (2004); Ralston (2008)) and parallel inclusions of multiple variables together with culture as predictors of behavior and attitudes (e.g., Clungston, Howell, and Dorfman (2000); Kirkman and Shapiro (2001)).

2. Theory and Hypotheses

2.1 Promotion Opportunities and Professional Development

Job seekers' application decisions depend on the potential employer's brand image, which Collins and Stevens (2002, 1122) measure according to "potential applicants' attitudes and perceived attributes about the job or organization." To structure applicants' perceptions of the attributes of potential employers, researchers often use the instrumental-symbolic framework from brand management literature (e.g., Backhaus and Tikoo (2004); Lievens and Highhouse (2003); Lievens, van Hove, and Anseel (2007); Martin and Hetrick (2009)). Instrumental brand benefits describe objective, tangible, physical attributes of a product; symbolic benefits relate to its subjective, abstract, and intangible attributes, which are linked to people's need to maintain their self-identity, express themselves, or enhance their self-images (Aaker (1997); Shavitt (1990); Solomon (1983)).

In an employer branding context, instrumental attributes refer to the job or the organization's objective and concrete attributes, such as salary or leave allowances. Symbolic attributes describe subjective aspects of the organization or job, often related to perceptions of the firm's prestige (Backhaus and Tikoo (2004); Lievens and Highhouse (2003)). Previous research shows that both types of attributes, symbolic and instrumental, significantly influence employment-related outcomes, such as application intentions, job choice, and organizational attractiveness (e.g., Cable and Judge (1994); Carless (2005); Chapman et al. (2005); Lievens and Highhouse (2003); Lievens, van Hove, and Anseel (2007)). Among the instrumental attributes discussed in previous research and theory, which include e.g. salary, benefits, job work tasks, work environment, international work assignments, company location, or organization size, we focus on the attributes of promotion opportunities and professional development and training, representing key facets of employer image that contribute significantly to employer attractiveness (Highhouse et al. (1999); Lievens and Highhouse (2003); Lievens et al. (2007); Sutherland, Torricelli, and Karg (2002); Thomas and Wise (1999); Trank, Rynes, and Bretz (2002); Van Hove and Lievens (2007)).

When analyzing the importance of image facets, few studies of employer attractiveness consider individual difference variables though.

To target a variety of desired applicants, employer brand managers must determine whether any given facet is of differential importance for specific target groups, such as male or female students, business or engineering students, and high potential or average students. Beyond the individual difference variables, national difference variables should be addressed when developing international employer branding strategies. If preference structures differ across nations, the employer's brand positioning should be adapted rather than standardized (Usunier (1996)). Therefore, we examine the influence of individual and national difference variables on the evaluation of promotion opportunities and professional development.

2.2 Micro-Level Characteristics: Demographics and Achievement

Several recruitment studies suggest evidence of the influence of candidates' gender, course of study, and academic achievement on their attribute importance ratings (Harold and Ployhart (2008); Kirchgeorg and Lorbeer (2002); Murrell, Frieze, and Frost (1991); Rynes (1991); Sallop and Kirby (2007); Sutherland, Torricelli, and Karg (2002); Thomas and Wise (1999); Trank, Rynes, and Bretz (2002)), though exclusively in a single domestic context. While this evidence has been found by applying ordinary regression models or ANOVAs, we do not know if these individual difference variables are still of equal significance if macro-level differentiating variables are taken into account at the same time and in the same model. To shed more light onto this question, this study is the first to investigate the impact of demographic and achievement variables in a multilevel model and in relation to national characteristics.

In the previously studied domestic context, students' academic achievement seems to serve as a particularly strong differentiator, such that Trank et al. (2002) find that high ability students attach more importance to opportunities for promotion and additional training than do average students. Motivational research similarly demonstrates that highly accomplished people try to seek new challenges to broaden their competences (e.g., Kanfer and Heggstad (1997); Spence and Helmreich (1983)). Challenging situations in organizations may entail opportunities for further training, and promotions also imply more challenging work assignments. Furthermore, promotions represent a public form of recognition that has great importance for individuals motivated by competitive excellence and a desire to differentiate themselves from others (Frank and Cook (1995); Kanfer and Heggstad (1997); Spence and Helmreich (1983)). Therefore, we predict:

Hypothesis 1: High-potential students attach more importance to (a) promotion opportunities and (b) professional development/training than do average students.

Sutherland, Torricelli, and Karg (2002) also note that ratings of employer attributes vary by gender, a finding confirmed by Murrell, Frieze, and Frost (1991) and Sallop and Kirby (2007). Men and women tend to focus on different factors when choosing an employer; Kirchgeorg and Lorbeer (2002) also discern significant differences in the attribute ratings of male and female students, such that women attach more value to opportunities for training. In addition, women value comfort-focused attributes, such as a friendly work atmosphere, stable working conditions, high security, and work-private life balance more strongly, which implies that highly competitive attributes, such as promotion opportunities, may be less important to them. Therefore, we predict:

Hypothesis 2a: Male students attach more importance to promotion opportunities than do female students.

Hypothesis 2b: Female students attach more importance to professional development/training than do male students.

Kirchgeorg and Lorbeer (2002) also examine students' course of study as a difference variable, comparing business, engineering, and natural science students. The business students attach significantly higher priorities to certain employer attributes, such as promotion opportunities and professional development. We assume that these findings hold in our multilevel setting as well:

Hypothesis 3: Business students attach more importance to (a) promotion opportunities and (b) professional development/training than do engineering students.

Another potential influence stems from students' age, though we find only limited support for any such influence on attribute evaluations. Harold and Ployhart (2008) claim that students' progress through the recruitment process or employer-related decision making could affect their attribute evaluations; because younger students likely have been less involved in recruiting processes and employer-related decision making, they may have different preferences than older students.

In a domestic context, Sutherland, Torricelli, and Karg (2002) identify differences in attribute rankings by four different age groups, such that career growth opportunities appear very important for younger and average aged students, whereas personal development increases in importance for older groups. Therefore, we suggest:

Hypothesis 4a: Younger students attach more importance to promotion opportunities than do older students.

Hypothesis 4b: Older students attach more importance to professional development/training than do younger students.

2.3 Macro-Level Characteristics: National Culture and Economic Development

As outlined in the previous section, individual differences could influence evaluations of employer characteristics, but additional differences likely arise from specific country characteristics. Potential differences on the macro level might reflect various factors, such as the economic or labor market situation of a particular country (Erlinghagen (2008)). Beyond these “hard” factors, “soft” factors related to cultural differences should influence subjective assessments of employer image facets as well. The definition and conceptualization of culture remains a challenge for cross-cultural research; for this study, we adopt the definition provided by House, Javidan, and Dorfman (2001, 494), according to which culture is defined as “shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences of members of collectives and are transmitted across age generations.”

Cultural characteristics do not necessarily coincide with national borders, though empirical research offers proof of cultural differences on the country level (e.g., Hofstede (1980, 1991, 2001); House et al. (2004); Steenkamp (2001)) that imply the existence of different value systems. According to some comparative cultural studies (e.g., Hofstede (1980); House et al. (2004)), cultural differences on the country level reflect several cultural dimensions. The work of Hofstede (1980, 1991, 2001) has become one of the most cited in international marketing and business literature; however it has also been heavily criticized (e.g., Baskerville (2003); Cayla and Arnould (2008); Gerhart and Fang (2005); McSweeney (2002); Sivakumar and Nakata (2001)). A more recent approach that extends Hofstede’s dimensions of culture has been developed by House and colleagues (House et al. (2001, 2004)). The *Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness* (GLOBE) research program identifies nine dimensions of culture that apply to organizational and societal levels. If societies or nations vary in their cultural dimensions, the differences likely have an impact on job seekers’ value systems and behavior and thus on their evaluations of important employer characteristics. That is, we anticipate that the facets of employer image vary in importance depending on the job seeker’s nationality or country of study. The direct influence of national cultural dimensions on evaluations of employer image facets has not been studied previously, though reasoning based on cross-cultural theory suggests some predictions and pertinent attributes, including the country’s degrees of humane orientation, future orientation, and performance orientation.

House et al. (2001, 496) define humane orientation as “the degree to which individuals in organizations or societies encourage and reward individuals for being fair, altruistic, friendly, generous, caring, and kind to others.” The concept is rooted in culture theory (Triandis (1995)), according to which altruism, kindness, love, benevolence, and generosity motivate people’s behavior in societies characterized by strong humane orientations (Kabasakal and Bodur (2004)). Accordingly, people are motivated by their need for belonging and affiliation rather than by self-fulfillment, self-enhancement, material possessions, or power. Cross-cultural differences in humane orientation emerge in various studies (e.g., Bigoness and Blakely (1996); Hofstede (1980, 1991, 2001); Schwartz and Bilsky (1987, 1990)), which supports the validity of the construct. For employer attractiveness, this cultural dimension implies that students from countries that score high on the humane orientation measure might be more motivated and attracted by aspects of human relations and affiliation than by the prospect of power or self-enhancement, such that promotion opportunities (a form of self-enhancement and achievement of power) might seem less important to these students. Accordingly, we predict:

Hypothesis 5: Students from nations that score high on the humane orientation scale value promotion opportunities less than do students in low humane orientation nations.

The dimension of future orientation is defined as “the degree to which individuals in organizations or societies engage in future-oriented behaviors such as planning, investing in the future, and delaying gratification” (House et al. (2001, 495)). In line with prior findings (e.g., Hall (1960); Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961)), it can be stated that societies scoring high on the future orientation scale include people who are more intrinsically motivated and who value deferred gratification while emphasizing long-term success (Ashkanasy et al. (2004)).

They tend to accept a longer time horizon for decision making and use more systematic planning processes (Javidan and Dastmalchian (2009)). According to Kats et al. (2010), there is an intuitive link between future orientation and careers, because careers represent a constant exercise in deferred gratification. The reward for present job performance is expected to come in the future, through career development and the achievement of a more central position in the organization (Schein (1971)). Thus, skills development and competence should be more important than immediate rewards in cultures characterized by a high future orientation (Zhang et al. (2006)). In addition, people from these cultures should be more attracted by promotion opportunities, which imply advances to more central positions within the firm in the future. Thus, we predict:

Hypothesis 6: Students from nations that score high on the future orientation scale value (a) promotion opportunities and (b) professional development/training more than do students in low future orientation nations.

Our last dimension, performance orientation, refers to “the extent to which an organization or society encourages and rewards group members for performance improvement and excellence” (House et al. (2001, 495)). It relates to issues of internal integration and external adaption of a community or society, which affect how a society defines success in adapting to external challenges and manages interrelationships among individuals (Javidan (2004)). With regard to internal integration, highly performance-oriented societies likely value members who accomplish their assignments and produce results (Parsons and Shils (1951); Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997)). With their focus on achievement, they value tasks more than relationships (Murray (1938)), such that societies with high performance orientation scores should value training and development, reward performance, and embrace materialism and financial rewards. In contrast, people from societies with low scores on the performance orientation scale likely value societal and family relationships, use performance appraisal systems that promote loyalty and cooperativeness, and regard monetary motivations as inappropriate (Javidan (2004)). In work environments, this implies that in countries with high scores on this cultural practice, organizations likely promote training and development, whereas in countries with low scores, firms should prioritize family connections and background (Javidan and Dastmalchian (2009)). With the emphasis on tasks instead of relationships in countries characterized by a high performance orientation, promotion opportunities should be considered more important, because promotions generally represent rewards for effective performance and task accomplishment. Thus we predict:

Hypothesis 7: Students from nations with high scores on the performance orientation scale value (a) promotion opportunities and (b) professional training/development more than do students in low performance orientation nations.

In addition to cultural characteristics, we anticipate that a country’s economic development might influence job seekers’ preference structures. Crossvergence theorists argue that the combination of socio-cultural characteristics and business ideology drives individual-level values and behavior and results in a unique value system that reflects the dynamic interaction of these influences (Ralston (2008); Ralston et al. (1993)). A nation’s business ideology incorporates three macro-level factors, namely economic, political, and technological factors. Ralston and colleagues have identified a set of macro-predictor variables for these influences, including gross national income (GNI) per capita for economic influence (Ralston (2008)). Considering the relevance of these indicators in the context of employer attractiveness, we include hypotheses of economic influence into our research models. That is, a country’s GNI/capita value might be particularly relevant for employer branding, because the labor market is assumed to be influenced by economic development, so even countries with similar cultural characteristics could have quite different labor markets, or vice versa (Kats et al. (2010)). In particular, in economically less developed countries, the image facets of promotion opportunities and professional development might be relatively more important for students striving to secure their income, financial independence, and future careers. Their greater experience with economically underprivileged conditions, compared with students from economically more prosperous societies, should encourage them to develop strong ambitions and use every opportunity for career advancement. Thus, we predict:

Hypothesis 8: Students in economically less prosperous nations value (a) promotion opportunities and (b) professional development/training more than do students in economically more prosperous nations.

These hypotheses lead to the research models we propose in *Figures 1* and *2*.

Figure 1: Research Model A (Promotion Opportunities)

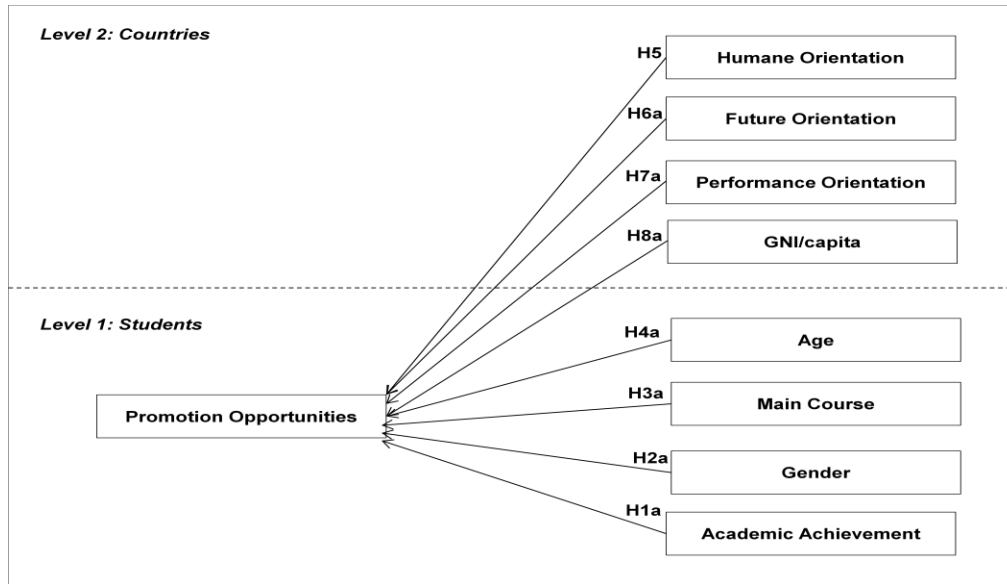
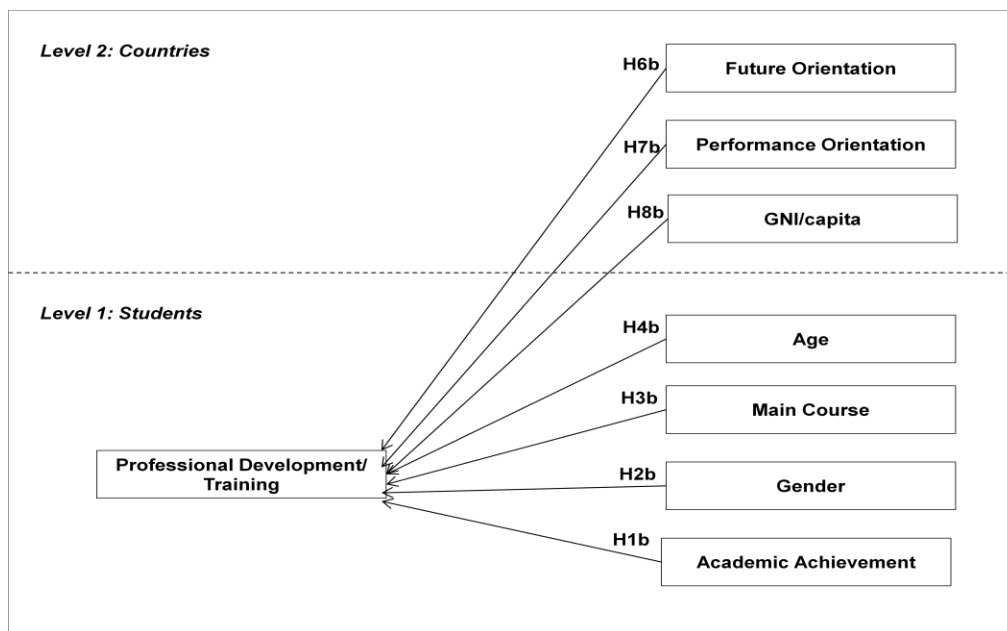


Figure 2: Research Model B (Professional Development/Training)



3. Methodology

3.1 Sample

A professional market research agency collected the survey data during a period from September 2009 to January 2010. The original questionnaire had been reviewed and translated by native speakers from each participating country. After the back-translation step, the research agency reviewed it again before distributing it to students from selected universities in each country, through a password-protected online platform. A total of 219,790 undergraduate and graduate students from more than 600 universities in 24 countries responded to the questionnaire. For our present analyses, we reduced the sample by excluding any responses with missing values, and then retained only business and engineering students, who are most subject to employers’ recruiting efforts. In addition, we removed six countries for which no secondary data on their cultural dimension scores were available.

Thus the final sample consists of 90,944 students from 18 countries: Austria (N = 9,161), Denmark (N = 1,710), Finland (N = 4,611), France (N = 17,200), Germany (N = 1,613), Greece (N = 926), Hungary (N = 15,699), Republic of Ireland (N = 1,162), Italy (N = 7,967), Netherlands (N = 2,793), Poland (N = 5,099), Portugal (N = 6,818), Russia (N = 1,245), Spain (N = 11,040), Sweden (N = 1,659), Switzerland (N = 4,890), Turkey (N = 2,593), and United Kingdom (N = 1,951). Students' average age was 22.4 years, 56.6% were men, and 43% studied business.

3.2 Measurements

Professional Development/Training and Promotion Opportunities

For the image facets professional development/training, and promotion opportunities, we used single-item measures, adapted from previous research on organizational attractiveness (Lievens and Highhouse (2003); Sutherland, Torricelli, and Karg (2002); Thomas and Wise (1999); Trank, Rynes, and Bretz (2002)). Amongst other items, respondents indicated the importance of each facet for their individual choice of employer on a four-point Likert-type response scale, ranging from 1 = "not important" to 4 = "very important."

Course of Study, Gender, Age, and Academic Achievement

We coded the respondents' gender as 0 for male students and 1 for female students. For students' main course of study, we used 0 for business students and 1 for engineering students. Respondents' academic achievement was a self-reported measure with five categories: outstanding achievement (top 20% of students), above average achievement (top 40%), average achievement, below average achievement (bottom 40%), or poor achievement (bottom 20% of students). Even though the accuracy of the self-reported achievement could not be verified, there is previous research reporting high correlations ($r = .85$ or higher) between self-reported data and objective measures (Gully et al. (2002)). For our multilevel analyses, we dichotomized this variable as 0 for average and low achievers and 1 for high achievers, represented by only the top 20% of students. This transformation acknowledges that high-potential students are of special interest to many employers and often differ from the average of students in their preferences. Furthermore, the binary scoring contributes to counter rater leniency bias (Bass (1956)).

Cultural Values

The country scores for the three cultural dimensions were taken from the GLOBE project (House et al. (2004)). This approach, in which we extrapolated data on cultural characteristics from another study to our respondents, has been referred to as "Indirect Values Inference" (Lenartowicz and Roth (1999)). To avoid the potential for measurement error with this approach that arises if the sample characteristics of the studies do not align, we must ensure that the samples for both studies are sufficiently large to randomize the effects of variables that could influence the outcome values (Lenartowicz and Roth (1999)). Our application fulfills this requirement. Furthermore, by using secondary country scores for cultural dimensions, according to Morosini, Shane, and Singh (1998), we avoid common method variance, retrospective evaluations, and rationalizations that often affect direct measures.

Economic Development

Finally, to measure a country's economic development, we used GNI/capita in U.S. dollars (World Bank (2009)), as recommended by crossvergence theorists (Ralston (2008)). Again, the application of secondary country scores further prevents our analyses from being affected by common method bias (Burton-Jones (2009)).

The descriptive statistics for all these variables appear in *Table 1*.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Main Course of Study	90944	0	1	.57	.495
Gender	90944	0	1	.43	.496
Age	90944	17	35	22.37	3.053
Academic Achievement	90944	0	1	.13	.336
Performance Orientation	90944	5.39	6.40	5.89	.239
Future Orientation	90944	4.33	5.91	5.33	.383
Humane Orientation	90944	5.20	5.81	5.55	.155
GNI/capita(US\$)	90944	8730	58930	32268.67	14782.098
Professional Development	90944	1	4	3.38	.676
Promotion Opportunities	90944	1	4	3.53	.623
Valid N (listwise)	90944				

4. Analysis and Results

To test our hypotheses, we applied hierarchical linear modeling with HLM 7 (Bryk and Raudenbush (1992)). This method is considered most appropriate for analyzing individual- and culture-level data simultaneously, as a multilevel, i.e. nested, data structure violates the assumption of independence of observations that characterizes ordinary linear models (Cheung, Leung, and Au (2006); Raudenbush and Bryk (2002)). However, multilevel analyses are particularly sensitive to multicollinearity, so we first checked for this potential impact by calculating the variance inflation factors (VIF) in an ordinary least squares regression of the direct effects. The values range from 1.0 to 2.7, well below the recommended threshold of 10 (Chin (1998)). Thus, multicollinearity problems should not be a concern.

4.1 Intercept-Only Models

A classical method for examining multilevel models uses a stepwise approach, which we adopted for our analyses (Hox (2002); Raudenbush and Bryk (2002); Wieseke et al. (2008)). We first calculated the intercept-only models, which consist of a constant only and do not include any predictor variables. The constant may vary across levels, so we can calculate the variance at each level (Wieseke et al. (2008)). To determine the variance at each level, we calculated the intra-class correlation coefficients (ICC) of both models, which indicate the amount of between-group variance of the dependent variables (Bryk and Raudenbush (1992)). For Model A (promotion opportunities), the ICC value was 0.069, indicating that 6.9% of the variance in the importance of promotion opportunities resides between countries. For Model B (professional development/training), the ICC value of 0.095 indicated that 9.5% of the variance in the importance of professional development and training resides between countries.

4.2 Hypothesis Testing

In a second step, we included predictors at the micro- and macro-levels as fixed variables. We also determined if any of the slopes of the explanatory variables had a significant between-group variance component (Hox (2002); Raudenbush and Bryk (2002)), that is, if the contribution of any individual-level predictors varied across countries. Therefore, the regression slopes were allowed to vary. Following Hox (2002), we grand mean-centered the group-level explanatory variables and the individual-level age variable to make 0 a legitimate, observable value. Starting with Model A (see Table 2), we then tested the added parameters for significance, to determine the contribution of each variable.

Our results indicate that academic achievement relates positively to the importance of promotion opportunities, such that high-potential students value promotion opportunities more than do average students (coeff. = 0.021, $p < 0.001$), in support of Hypothesis 1a. We also find a negative relation of gender to the importance of promotion opportunities, in line with Hypothesis 2a, in that male students attach more weight to promotion opportunities than do female students (coeff. = -0.023, $p < 0.05$). Hypothesis 3a receives support too, as business students value promotion opportunities more than do engineering students (coeff. = -0.139, $p < 0.001$). In addition and in support of Hypothesis 4a, age has a significant negative effect (coeff. = -0.038, $p < 0.01$), indicating that promotion opportunities are more important for students who are younger than the average respondent.

At the country level, the cultural dimension of humane orientation relates positively to the importance of promotion opportunities, which contradicts Hypothesis 5: Students from countries with higher average scores on the humane orientation scale value promotion opportunities more than do students from countries with lower average scores (coeff. = 0.104, $p < 0.01$). A similar result emerges for Hypothesis 7a, such that students from countries that score higher on the performance orientation scale attach less importance to promotion opportunities than do students from countries with lower scores on this dimension (coeff. = -0.071, $p < 0.05$). Hypothesis 6a, pertaining to the direct effect of future orientation, receives no support. Finally, in support of Hypothesis 8a, GNI/capita exhibits a significant, negative relationship to the importance of promotion opportunities. In countries with a lower average GNI/capita, promotion opportunities are relatively more important to students (coeff. = -0.210, $p < 0.001$).

For the random effects, we find that the slopes of the individual-level predictors course of study, gender, and age reveal significant variance components between groups, such that the impact of these variables varies across countries. The same finding does not apply to academic achievement, which shows no significant random effect. Furthermore, following Snijders and Bosker (1999), we find that the variance explained at level 1 is 6.2% of the total variance between students studying in the same country, and the variance explained at level 2 is 67.4% of the total variance between countries.

Table 2: Results of the Multilevel Analysis Model A (Promotion Opportunities)

Fixed Effect	Coefficient (S.E.)		t-ratio	Hyp.
Intercept	3.586 (.020)	***	174.868	
<i>Group-Level Antecedents</i>				
Future Orientation	-.056 (.066)		-1.347	H6a
Humane Orientation	.104 (.106)	**	3.377	H5
Performance Orientation	-.071 (.066)	*	-2.561	H7a
GNI/capita	-.210 (.000)	***	-4.613	H8a
<i>Individual-Level Antecedents</i>				
Main Course	-.139 (.019)	***	-9.250	H3a
Gender	-.023 (.013)	*	-2.277	H2a
Academic Achievement	.021 (.006)	***	6.463	H1a
Age	-.038 (.002)	**	-3.497	H4a
Random Effect	Variance Component	χ^2		d.f.
Intercept, u_0	.007	325.008	***	13
Level-1 r	.365			
Main Course slope, u_1	.006	226.757	***	17
Gender slope, u_2	.002	104.273	***	17
Age slope, u_3	.001	126.036	***	17
Explained Variance				
R ² Level-1	.062			
R ² Level-2	.674			

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

We then proceed with the hypothesis tests for Model B (see Table 3). In support of Hypothesis 1b, high-potential students value the opportunity for professional development and training more than do average students (coeff. = 0.022, $p < 0.01$). Female students value professional development and training more than do male students, in support of Hypothesis 2b (coeff. = 0.066, $p < 0.001$), and business students attach a higher importance to professional development than engineering students, in support of Hypothesis 3b (coeff. = -0.029, $p < 0.01$). In addition, the age predictor has a significant positive relationship with the dependent variable, such that older students consider professional development more important than younger students (coeff. = 0.041, $p < 0.01$), in line with Hypothesis 4b.

Both Hypotheses 7b and 8b receive support: Students from countries with higher average scores on performance orientation value the opportunity for professional development and training more than their counterparts from less performance-oriented countries (coeff. = 0.098, $p < 0.05$), and GNI/capita has a significant negative effect on the importance of professional development (coeff. = -0.360, $p < 0.001$).

Of the random effects, we find that the impact of the individual-level predictor variables varies significantly across countries. Again using Snijders and Bosker's (1999) formula, we find that Model B explains 3.5% of the total variance of the dependent variable on the individual level. On the group level, the model explains 28.5% of the total variance between countries.

Table 3: Results of the Multilevel Analysis Model B (Professional Development)

Fixed Effect	Coefficient (S.E.)		t-ratio	Hyp.
Intercept	3.403 (.056)	***	60.702	
<i>Group-Level Antecedents</i>				
Future Orientation	-.077 (.096)		-1.405	H6b
Performance Orientation	.098 (.113)	*	2.281	H7b
GNI/capita	-.360 (.000)	***	-6.075	H8b
<i>Individual-Level Antecedents</i>				
Main Course	-.029 (.010)	**	-3.671	H3b
Gender	.066 (.015)	***	5.782	H2b
Academic Achievement	.022 (.012)	**	3.659	H1b
Age	.041 (.002)	**	3.619	H4b
Random Effect	Variance Component	χ^2		d.f.
Intercept, u_0	.056	3118.489	***	14
Level-1 r	.422			
Main Course slope, u_1	.001	99.531	***	17
Gender slope, u_2	.004	132.842	***	17
Ac. Achievement slope, u_4	.002	42.147	***	17
Age slope, u_3	.000	175.325	***	17
Explained Variance				
R ² Level-1	.035			
R ² Level-2	.285			

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

5. Discussion

This study has attempted to assess the extent to which European students' ratings of employer image facets (i.e., promotion opportunities and professional development) differ across countries and identify influences that explain the variance in these ratings. Our main goal has been to enrich research into employer branding by conducting a cross-national multilevel analysis that incorporates individual difference variables, national culture, and economic development characteristics in a single model to determine their impact on attribute evaluations. We argued that differences in students' importance ratings of promotion opportunities and professional development might be caused by the individual-level variables gender, course of study, academic achievement, or age, as well as by the country-level variables humane orientation, performance orientation, future orientation, or GNI/capita. As hypothesized, we find that students' gender, course of study, and academic achievement significantly influence their ratings of both attributes. Accordingly, we can prove that previous findings on the influence of these variables (Harold and Ployhart (2008); Kirchgeorg and Lorbeer (2002); Murrell, Frieze, and Frost (1991); Rynes (1991); Sallop and Kirby (2007); Sutherland, Torricelli, and Karg (2002); Thomas and Wise (1999); Trank, Rynes, and Bretz (2002)) also hold true when related to macro-level factors in a multilevel context. In addition, the predictor variable age offers an important differentiating characteristic, in support of the proposition that younger students, who likely have not progressed far in the employer selection and recruiting process, value certain employer image facets differently than do older students who have devoted themselves more to this topic (Harold and Ployhart (2008)).

At the country level, we find no support for the influence of future orientation, whereas a nation's performance orientation relates positively to the importance of professional development and training. Performance orientation also exerts a significant impact on the importance of promotion opportunities, though in the direction opposite that we predicted. Perhaps promotion opportunities seem more important in relatively less performance-oriented countries because such cultures often prioritize traditional social hierarchies. According to the GLOBE framework, they emphasize seniority and experience; and who a person is offers more value than what he or she does. Whereas in highly performance-oriented cultures, success depends on individual achievement, individuals in less performance-oriented cultures lack as much self-control of their fortunes (Javidan (2004)). Thus, they might consider promotion opportunities important prerequisites for achieving greater societal status. Furthermore and in contrast with another hypothesis, we find that a humane orientation relates positively to the importance of promotion opportunities. This result might reflect the importance of paternalistic norms and patronage relationships in high humane orientation societies (Kabasakal and Bodur (2004)). Because people depend on them, promotions might be considered more important in countries with patronage systems than in countries in which formal welfare institutions replace paternalistic norms and patronage relationships.

As hypothesized, we identify a highly significant effect of GNI/capita on attribute evaluations. That is, a country's economic development likely influences its people's work values and preference patterns (Ralston (2008)). Students from less prosperous societies value promotion opportunities and professional development more than do students from nations with a high GNI/capita. In comparison with the influence of cultural characteristics, the strong impact of GNI/capita might partially be due to greater differences in its value across the observed countries. The future, humane, and performance orientation scores are relatively homogeneous across countries, even with the inclusion of non-EU countries such as Turkey and Russia. In contrast, these nations exhibit relatively vast differences in their GNI/capita, ranging from \$8,730 (Turkey) and \$9,370 (Russia) to \$58,930 (Denmark) and \$49,350 (the Netherlands).

Moreover, it can be stated that the between-country variance in both employer image facets is relatively small. The observed countries do not differ to a great extent with regard to students' ratings of the importance of either promotion opportunities or professional development. This outcome might indicate the general homogeneity of the European student population; students tend to be exposed to different cultures more than other populations, due to their traveling and information gathering behaviors (Douglas and Craig (2006)). Their preference patterns thus might converge because they take the perspective of other cultures. The previously identified convergence of preferences in the context of consumer behavior (e.g., Baalbaki and Malhotra (1995); Chernatony, Halliburton, and Bernath (1995); Melewar and Vemmervik (2004); Papavassiliou and Stathakopoulos (1997)) appears to apply to the context of employer choice too, at least for the observed student population and with regard to the chosen image facets.

Thus, though we identify the influences of cultural and economic indicators on evaluations of promotion opportunities and professional development, we acknowledge that their practical impact is relatively minor, considering the comparably small amount of between-country variance.

6. Limitations and Implications

6.1 Theoretical Implications and Limitations

This study has several implications for theoretical development and further research. First, we show that multilevel analysis is a meaningful technique for analyzing potential influences on employer image facets, in that it can combine micro- with macro-level influences in a single model. Influences on both levels should be incorporated into the research design, because individual, cultural, and economic characteristics all have significant impacts on students' preference structures. With this finding, we contribute to the empirical and theoretical foundation of research in international employer branding, which is still scarce to this date. Based on our analyses, an extension to include other employer image facets might help describe potential influences on job seekers' preferences for employer image attributes in more detail.

Second, we show that integrating single employer image facets into an overall scale (e.g., Collins (2007)) might conceal variance in the importance of specific image facets across countries, depending on the facet being evaluated. As our results show, the between-country variance of professional development is greater than that of promotion opportunities, so recruitment research should continue to investigate the effects on separate employer image facets.

Third, we contribute to cross-cultural research by identifying cultural dimensions relevant to students' employer image perceptions. The significant impact of two cultural dimensions suggests the need for further investigations in the context of employer branding. In a related finding, our study is the first to identify a nation's economic development as an important influence on students' attribute preferences. Future cross-national research on employer attractiveness should explore this influence more systematically.

Several limitations of this study present opportunities for further work. To measure professional development and promotion opportunities, we used single-item scales, which is consistent with prior research but prevents us from calculating the scales' reliability. The single-item measures also limit our assessments of construct equivalence, which is an important prerequisite for ensuring the equivalence and comparability of data obtained in different cultures (Craig and Douglas (2000); Malhotra, Agarwal, and Peterson (1996); Van de Vijver (2003)). For example, we cannot completely rule out the potential problem of varying response styles, which are referred to as respondents' tendencies to respond systematically to questionnaire items on a basis other than what the items are designed to measure (Paulhus (1991)). While acquiescence, use of middle response category, and socially desirable responding should not have affected our data, a potential bias resulting from extreme response style (Malhotra, Agarwal, J., and Peterson (1996)) could not be assessed in our study due to the single item measures. We also have to acknowledge that professional development and promotion opportunities are only two facets of an employer's image, and our study does not attempt to cover the entire construct. Therefore, our findings neither generalize to other image facets nor to the construct as a whole.

Furthermore, the general criticism regarding the use of cultural dimensions in cross-national research applies to our study. Critics argue that these dimensions cannot capture all relevant aspects of culture (Briley, Morris, and Simonson (2000)). Using a single dimension score for each country arguably ignores within-country variance, especially in countries that embrace different subcultures (Au (1999); McSweeney (2002); Tung and Baumann (2009)). However, the concept of culture can contribute to explanations of cultural differences only if its components can be identified (Samiee and Jeong (1994); Schwartz (1994)). Thus, the benefits of the cultural dimension approach for cross-cultural research still appear to outweigh its limitations (Soares, Farhangmehr, and Shoham (2007)).

Further research should also investigate additional factors that might influence job seekers' evaluations of employer image facets. The predictor variables we used explain only 6.2% of the level 1 variance in Model A and 3.5% in Model B, which implies influences other than demographics that have not been included in our research design. In particular, cross-level interaction effects might explain additional variance, as we find that the impact of individual-level predictors (except academic achievement in Model A) varies across countries. Thus, additional research could benefit from a sound theoretical development and test of interaction effects.

With regard to our sample, it has to be acknowledged that our results generalize only to business and engineering students in mainly European countries. The conclusions do not necessarily apply to non-student populations, such as young professionals or non-academic job seekers, which are further target groups for employer branding activities. These groups might differ in their preference structures and value employer image facets differently than do students (Chapman et al. (2005)). Nor can we confirm that the same effects would arise in culturally more heterogeneous countries beyond Europe. Ongoing research should continue to investigate other populations and a broader range of countries, including emerging economies.

6.2 Managerial Implications

International companies must attract and retain highly talented workers worldwide, which requires them to understand what drives the employment choices of potential employees in various national markets. To advance such understanding, we explore international students' evaluations of promotion opportunities and professional development as important facets of employer attractiveness. Cultural characteristics influence students' preferences for these drivers, though their overall impact is not as great as we expected, according to previous intercultural research (e.g., Hofstede (1980); House et al. (2004)). The relatively small between-country variance in the importance of promotion opportunities and professional development suggests the potential for a standardized employer brand positioning with regard to these image facets when targeting the extended European student market. As both facets are among the most important when compared to other attributes, employers could reap the advantages of a standardized employer value proposition that includes either one or both attributes. For a more fine-grained perspective to segment the market, employer brand managers should take into account countries' economic development, expressed through their GNI/capita, as we find it affects students' preferences more strongly than do cultural characteristics. Moreover, our findings suggest that in the course of developing targeted employer value propositions for European students, managers should not neglect individual segmentation bases, such as gender, course of study, academic achievement, and age, given our findings on their impacts in relation to macro-level influences, as well as on the relatively large amount of within-country variance.

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