The Instrumental and Symbolic Dimensions of Organizations’ Image as an Employer:
A Large-Scale Field Study on Employer Branding in Turkey

Greet Van Hoye
Ghent University, Belgium
Turker Bas
Yeni IK Consulting Group, Istanbul, Turkey
Saartje Cromheecke and Filip Lievens
Ghent University, Belgium

Greet Van Hoye, Assistant Professor, Department of Personnel Management, Work and Organizational Psychology, Ghent University, Belgium; Turker Bas, Professor, Yeni IK Consulting Group, Istanbul, Turkey; Saartje Cromheecke, PhD student, Department of Personnel Management, Work and Organizational Psychology, Ghent University, Belgium; Filip Lievens, Professor, Department of Personnel Management, Work and Organizational Psychology, Ghent University, Belgium.

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Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Greet Van Hoye, Department of Personnel Management, Work and Organizational Psychology, Ghent University, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium. Phone: +32 9 264 64 54, Fax: +32 9 264 64 94, E-mail: greet.vanhoye@ugent.be
Abstract

Research on recruitment and employer branding has typically been situated in Western countries with predominantly individualistic cultures. The present study investigates the instrumental-symbolic framework for studying organizations’ image and attraction as an employer in a non-Western collectivistic culture. In a large nationwide sample of Turkish university students, both instrumental (working conditions) and symbolic image dimensions (competence) were positively related to organizational attractiveness. Moreover, symbolic traits explained significant incremental variance beyond instrumental attributes and accounted for a greater amount of predictable variance. In addition, organizations were better differentiated from each other on the basis of symbolic image dimensions (sincerity and innovativeness) than on the basis of instrumental dimensions (task demands). Overall, these findings provide support for the applicability of the instrumental-symbolic framework across different countries, cultures, and organizations.

KEYWORDS: Recruitment, attraction, employer branding, image, instrumental-symbolic framework, culture, individualism-collectivism, Turkey.
Introduction

Attracting and retaining the most talented employees is crucial for organizational success and survival. Organizations’ perceived image as an employer has been identified as one of the main determinants of job seekers’ attraction to organizations (Highhouse, Zickar, Thorsteinson, Stierwalt, & Slaughter, 1999). Employer image consists of individuals’ perceptions of what is distinctive, central, and enduring about the organization as a place to work (Highhouse, Brooks, & Gregarus, 2009). It has become a challenge for organizations to create and change their employer image to attract the right employees, a process called employer branding (Edwards, 2010).

Given that prior research has conceptualized and measured employer image in widely divergent ways (for a review of this research and related concepts, see Highhouse et al., 2009), Lievens and Highhouse (2003) introduced the instrumental-symbolic framework as an integrative theoretical framework for delineating the main components of organizations’ image as an employer. According to this framework, images consist of both instrumental and symbolic dimensions (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). The notion that people associate both instrumental functions and symbolic meanings with objects is in line with a long tradition in social psychology (Katz, 1960). Applied to a recruitment context, the instrumental-symbolic framework proposes that job seekers’ attraction to organizations can be explained by their perceptions of both instrumental attributes and symbolic traits as key components of organizations’ image as an employer (Lievens, 2007).

Instrumental image dimensions describe the organization in terms of objective, concrete, and factual attributes that are inherent of the organization, such as pay and advancement opportunities (Lievens, 2007). Job seekers are attracted to these instrumental attributes on the basis of their utilitarian need to maximize benefits and minimize costs (Katz, 1960). Previous research has typically applied an inductive qualitative strategy for identifying
the instrumental image dimensions possibly related to employer attractiveness in a specific context (Highhouse et al., 1999).

Furthermore, the instrumental-symbolic framework postulates that job seekers are also attracted to organizations because of the symbolic meanings that they associate with them (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). These symbolic image dimensions describe the organization in terms of subjective, abstract, and intangible traits, and are similar to what other researchers have labeled as organizational personality perceptions (Slaughter, Zickar, Highhouse, & Mohr, 2004). Job seekers are attracted to these symbolic traits because they enable them to maintain their self-identity, to enhance their self-image, or to express themselves (Aaker, 1997). Although individuals may associate a variety of traits with organizations, research has shown that these symbolic traits are best represented by five higher-order factors that generalize across different contexts: sincerity, innovativeness, competence, prestige, and robustness (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Accordingly, previous studies have typically measured symbolic image dimensions with an adapted version of Aaker’s (1997) brand personality scale, that captures these five broad factors (Lievens, 2007).

Prior research has applied the instrumental-symbolic framework for examining organizations’ image as an employer as perceived by job seekers (including students), applicants, and employees (Harold & Ployhart, 2008; Lievens, 2007; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Lievens, Van Hoye, & Anseel, 2007; Lievens, Van Hoye, & Schreurs, 2005; Schreurs, Druart, Proost, & De Witte, 2009; Van Hoye, 2008; Van Hoye & Saks, 2011). The findings of these studies can be summarized as follows. First, both instrumental and symbolic image dimensions are associated with job seekers’ and applicants’ attraction to the organization as an employer (Lievens, 2007) as well as with employees’ organizational identification and recommendation intentions (Lievens et al., 2007; Van Hoye, 2008). Second, symbolic traits account for incremental variance beyond instrumental image dimensions in predicting
organizational attractiveness (Van Hoye & Saks, 2011). Third, in terms of relative importance, symbolic dimensions seem to explain somewhat more variance in organizational attraction than instrumental attributes (Lievens et al., 2005). Fourth, organizations are better differentiated from each other on the basis of symbolic image dimensions than on the basis of instrumental attributes (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003).

Even though these findings seem to support the applicability of the instrumental-symbolic framework for studying organizations’ image and attractiveness as an employer, all these studies have been conducted in Western countries, namely the United States and Belgium (Harold & Ployhart, 2008; Lievens, 2007). Whereas those countries are characterized by a highly individualistic culture, many non-Western countries, whose importance in the global economy is rapidly rising (Tarique & Schuler, 2008), have a different culture, namely one high in collectivism. Consequently, it is not yet known whether the instrumental-symbolic framework can also be applied to understand job seekers’ attraction to organizations in a non-Western collectivistic culture.

Individualism-collectivism is one of the main dimensions on the basis of which national cultures can be distinguished (Hofstede, 2001). Whereas people in individualistic cultures perceive themselves as autonomous individuals independent of groups and mostly pursue personal goals, people in collectivistic cultures are integrated in cohesive in-groups that guide their attitudes and behavior (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). Not surprisingly then, research has found that this cultural dimension accounts for significant differences in recruitment activities and organizational attraction (Turban, Lau, Ngo, Chow, & Si, 2001). Moreover, De Mooij and Hofstede (2010) argue that individualism-collectivism has important consequences for branding and image strategies as well. In collectivistic cultures the public image or “face” of the group is more important than the face of the individual and people are more likely to define their self-concepts in terms of the characteristics of the
groups that they (want to) belong to (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). In terms of the instrumental-symbolic framework, people in a collectivistic culture may be more sensitive to the symbolic traits associated with the organization they would like to work for than people in an individualistic culture, given that those traits are more likely to affect their self-identity and self-image (Turban et al., 2001). In addition, people in collectivistic cultures may be more attracted to symbolic traits such as sincerity and prestige and less attracted to instrumental attributes such as pay and personal advancement, given that they highly value cohesive social groups and are less likely to pursue personal goals (Triandis et al., 1988).

Anderson, Haar, and Gibb (2010) began to shed some light on this issue by demonstrating that symbolic traits were significantly related to organizational attraction in a multi-cultural sample. However, their sample consisted of students from multiple countries of which some were high in individualism whereas others were high in collectivism, and these differences were not investigated. Moreover, instrumental image dimensions were not examined. Froese, Vo, and Garrett (2010) found that both instrumental and symbolic aspects of foreign country images affected people’s attraction to organizations from these countries. Even though this study was situated in a non-Western collectivistic culture (Vietnam), the focus was on country images and not on organizations’ image as an employer.

Therefore, several researchers have expressed the need to investigate the applicability of the instrumental-symbolic framework for studying employer image and attraction in other countries and cultures (Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Schreurs et al., 2009). The present study addresses this gap in the recruitment literature by applying the instrumental-symbolic framework to examine perceptions of organizations’ image and attractiveness as an employer in a large nationwide sample of Turkish university students, a population characterized by high scores on collectivism (Aygun & Imamoglu, 2002). Hence, this study aims to test the generalizability and robustness of previous findings.
on the instrumental-symbolic framework in Western individualistic cultures by replicating them in a non-Western collectivistic culture (Hofstede, 2001). We examine (1) the relationship of instrumental and symbolic image dimensions with organizational attractiveness, (2) the amount of incremental variance explained by symbolic traits beyond instrumental attributes, (3) the relative importance of instrumental and symbolic image dimensions, and (4) the extent to which instrumental and symbolic image dimensions are useful to differentiate between organizations. The present study is also the first to address these four issues together, providing a more complete and consistent picture with respect to the validity of the key assumptions of the instrumental-symbolic framework.

Method

Participants and Procedure

In the past, research on the instrumental-symbolic framework has investigated a limited range of organizations (i.e., financial, military, and educational organizations) (Harold & Ployhart, 2008; Lievens, 2007; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Therefore, the present study sought to include a wide range of organizations from different industries that were still competing in the same labor market. Specifically, this study is part of a nationwide project aimed at identifying the Most Admired Companies in Turkey and includes 277 organizations from 28 different industries. First, participants were asked to indicate in which industries they would want to work. Next, they were presented with a list of organizations active in the industries selected (with number of organizations per industry ranging from 4 to 21) and were asked to choose their single most admired employer. Subsequently, they rated the chosen organization on instrumental and symbolic image dimensions as well as on its attractiveness as an employer.

An e-mail was sent to 188,523 students pursuing a major in Economics or Engineering at 87 different universities in Turkey, inviting them to participate in the study. Participation
was voluntary and anonymous. No incentive was provided. If students agreed to participate, they could click on a link to a website with the questionnaire. We received responses from 45,553 students, yielding a response rate of 24.2%. To increase the reliability of the data, questionnaires with a fulfillment ratio lower than 90% were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 19,894 students. Of these participants, 54% was female and the mean age was 23.76 years ($SD = 2.46$). Whereas 61% came from state universities and 39% from private universities, 73% was a final-year student and 27% attended lower classes. Moreover, 74% was pursuing a degree in Economics, while 26% was trying to attain an Engineering degree.

**Measures**

Unless stated otherwise, items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

**Instrumental image dimensions.** Consistent with previous research (e.g., Lievens, 2007), an inductive qualitative strategy was followed to identify instrumental image dimensions possibly related to organizations’ attractiveness as an employer. In a pilot study, an assistant professor in human resources conducted three focus groups with a total of 50 Turkish final-year students (54% female; mean age = 23.72, $SD = .73$) pursuing a degree in Economics (56%) or Engineering (44%). Students were encouraged to freely express their thoughts about organizations as employers, their choice of favorite employer, and the reasons motivating their choice. In addition, students were probed to list fundamental factors influencing their employer preferences. All focus groups were videotaped and transcribed. Following the analysis of the focus groups, 19 items emerged as instrumental organizational attributes influencing students’ employer preferences. Next, these items were evaluated by three subject matter experts (i.e., the assistant professor conducting the focus groups, an assistant professor in business management, and a human resources expert) to determine their relevance and degree of overlap with the other items. As a result, two items were combined
into a single item and two items were removed, yielding a final scale of 16 items.

Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which the organization selected as their most admired employer possessed each of these 16 attributes. In line with recommendations of Gerbing and Hamilton (1996), we used exploratory factor analysis in one part of the sample as a precursor to confirmatory factor analysis in the other part of the sample. First, we randomly selected half of the sample and conducted an exploratory principal component analysis with varimax rotation and Kaiser normalization. The results showed that four components yielded eigenvalues greater than 1, which together accounted for 62.9% of the variance in the data. All items loaded highest on their respective factor, with loadings between .84 and .57. In addition, all cross-loadings were lower than .40. Factors were labeled considering the list of items under each factor and the respective loadings of the items. Next, a confirmatory factor analysis was run on the other half of the sample to cross-validate the four-factor structure of our instrumental image scale. The results confirmed that this four-factor model showed a good fit with the data, $\chi^2(98) = 1967.24, p < .01$, $GFI = .96$, $RMSEA = .057$.

Thus, the four instrumental image dimensions were pay/security (e.g., “Offers above average pay”, $\alpha = .84$), advancement (e.g., “Offers fair opportunities for advancement”, $\alpha = .75$), task demands (e.g., “Offers challenging tasks”, $\alpha = .74$), and working conditions (e.g., “Offers flexible working arrangements”, $\alpha = .65$). These final items and dimensions are similar to the items and dimensions found in other studies (e.g., Lievens & Highhouse, 2003).

**Symbolic image dimensions.** Symbolic image dimensions were measured with a scale typically used in previous research (e.g., Van Hoye & Saks, 2011). Specifically, Lievens and Highhouse (2003) adapted Aaker’s (1997) brand personality scale and found that five distinct factors can be used to describe the personality traits that people associate with organizations as employers: sincerity (e.g., “honest”, $\alpha = .80$), innovativeness (e.g., “daring”, $\alpha = .77$), competence (e.g., “intelligent”, $\alpha = .80$), prestige (e.g., “prestigious”, $\alpha = .83$), and
robustness (e.g., “strong”, $\alpha = .74$). Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which these traits were descriptive of their most admired organization as an employer. A confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the five-factor model produced a good fit with the data, $\chi^2(80) = 1431.98, p < .01$, $GFI = .99$, $RMSEA = .039$.

**Organizational attractiveness.** An organization’s perceived attractiveness as an employer was measured with three items from Highhouse, Lievens, and Sinar (2003). An example item is “For me, this organization would be a good place to work” ($\alpha = .79$).

**Convergent and discriminant validity.** Some additional confirmatory factor analyses were conducted to investigate the convergent and discriminant validity of our measures (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). First, the expected ten-factor measurement model, consisting of four instrumental and five symbolic image dimensions as well as organizational attractiveness, showed a good fit with the data, $\chi^2(482) = 11127.73, p < .01$, $GFI = .95$, $RMSEA = .043$, suggesting adequate discriminant validity. Furthermore, each item had a highly significant factor loading on the construct it was intended to measure and showed predictive power, indicating satisfactory convergent validity. Second, in further support of the discriminant validity of the measures, a one-factor model had a poor fit, $\chi^2(527) = 135082.78, p < .01$, $GFI = .60$, $RMSEA = .150$. Third, we tested an alternative three-factor model in which all instrumental image dimensions on the one hand and all symbolic image dimensions on the other hand were combined into a single factor. This model also showed a bad fit, $\chi^2(524) = 108069.60, p < .01$, $GFI = .65$, $RMSEA = .130$. Finally, we tested a number of alternative nine-factor models in which two highly correlated image dimensions (see Table 1) were combined into one factor. For example, a nine-factor model with advancement and task demands as a single factor showed an inadequate fit, $\chi^2(491) = 33963.84, p < .01$, $GFI = .86$, $RMSEA = .076$. Given that our proposed ten-factor model fit the data significantly better than any of the alternative models, these results indicate that the ten constructs measured were
relatively distinct from each other.

**Analysis**

One of the strengths of our study is the large sample of 19,894 students evaluating the image and attractiveness of 277 different organizations. This enabled us to investigate the assumptions of the instrumental-symbolic framework at the organizational level of analysis as well as to overcome problems of common method bias associated with single-source data (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This approach is similar to the one followed by Slaughter et al. (2004) and Anderson et al. (2010), but our organizational sample is much larger and our study also includes instrumental attributes in addition to symbolic traits. Specifically, a new data set was created in which individual student data were aggregated to the organizational level and each case represented a different organization with averaged scores on image and attractiveness. To ensure a reliable aggregated measurement, organizations that were evaluated by less than 20 people were removed (Anderson et al., 2010), resulting in a final sample of 206 organizations. Next, for each organization, we randomly selected half of the individual-level sample and averaged these students’ individual scores on the image dimensions to create organizational-level image variables. The other half of the sample was used to calculate average scores for organizational attractiveness. This procedure adequately addresses concerns of common method bias, given that respondents who assessed the organization on instrumental and symbolic image dimensions were different from those who rated its attractiveness. Thus, our results were not artificially inflated due to the same respondents scoring both sets of variables at the same time for the same organization (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

In addition, we added the industry in which each organization was active as a control variable to the organizational-level analyses. Given that 28 specific industries were included in this study, we first applied a more general categorization of organizations into agriculture,
manufacturing, service, and non-profit industries. As no agricultural and non-profit organizations were included in this study, only manufacturing (coded as 0) and service industries (coded as 1) were relevant.

Whereas our first three research questions (i.e., relationship with attractiveness, incremental variance, and relative importance) were examined at the organizational level, individual-level data were required to address the fourth research question (differentiation between organizations).

**Results**

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations for the organizational-level data. In line with the instrumental-symbolic framework, all instrumental and symbolic image dimensions, with the exception of task demands and prestige, were positively related to organizational attractiveness. Industry was not significantly related to any of the other variables.

To test the relationship of instrumental and symbolic image dimensions with organizational attractiveness, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted. Industry was added in the first step as a control variable, the instrumental attributes in the second step, and the symbolic traits in the third step (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). As shown in Table 2, industry was not a significant predictor. In Step 2, the instrumental image dimensions accounted for 7.3% of the variance in attractiveness. Organizations with good working conditions were perceived as more attractive employers. In the final step, the symbolic image dimensions accounted for significant incremental variance (5.8%). Students were more attracted to organizations who they perceived as being more competent.

In addition, given that regression coefficients are not interpretable as measures of relative importance when the predictor variables are interrelated as was the case in the present study (see Table 1), we also conducted a relative weights analysis to determine the relative
importance of instrumental and symbolic image dimensions in predicting organizational attractiveness (Johnson, 2000; Lievens et al., 2005). Relative weights are defined as the proportionate contribution that each predictor makes to $R^2$, considering both its unique contribution and its contribution when combined with the other predictor variables in the analysis (Johnson, 2000). For ease of interpreting relative weights, it is also possible to express them as percentages of the predictable variance ($R^2$). Inspection of the relative weights in Table 2 shows that the control variable industry contributed 6.3% to the predictable variance in attractiveness. The instrumental image dimensions contributed 42.1% to the predictable variance, with advancement making the largest contribution (22.1%). All symbolic image dimensions combined made the most important contribution (51.6%), with competence as the largest contributor (27.3%).

Finally, we examined the extent to which organizations could be differentiated from each other on the basis of the instrumental and symbolic image dimensions. Given that these analyses require multiple cases per organization, the individual-level data were used. Table 3 presents the image ratings of the top five most admired companies (scoring highest on organizational attractiveness) as well as the results of one-way analyses of variance. Organizations were perceived to differ significantly on two instrumental attributes (advancement and task demands) and three symbolic traits (sincerity, innovativeness, and prestige). Given the univariate nature of these analyses, we also conducted a discriminant function analysis to identify the image dimensions that maximally discriminated between these five organizations. As shown in Table 3, two discriminant functions were significant. The first function accounted for 57% of the variance between firms, $\chi^2 (27) = 56.31, p < .001$, and the second function for 27%, $\chi^2 (16) = 24.44, p < .001$. The within-group structure coefficients > .50 were used to interpret these functions. Whereas innovativeness and task demands had large loadings on the first function, sincerity loaded highly on the second
function, indicating that the organizations could be maximally differentiated from each other on the basis of these three dimensions.

**Discussion**

Overall, our findings provide support for the generalizability of the instrumental-symbolic framework for studying employer image in different cultures and organizations. First, we found that both instrumental and symbolic image dimensions were significantly related to organizations’ attractiveness as an employer, in line with previous research in the United States and Belgium (Harold & Ployhart, 2008; Lievens, 2007). Specifically, Turkish students were more attracted to organizations offering better working conditions as well as to organizations perceived to be more competent. Second, our results underline the key importance of symbolic traits for organizational attraction in a collectivistic culture such as Turkey, given that they explained significant incremental variance in attractiveness beyond instrumental attributes and accounted for a greater amount of predictable variance than instrumental attributes in terms of relative importance. In addition, organizations were better differentiated from each other on the basis of symbolic image dimensions (sincerity and innovativeness) than on the basis of instrumental dimensions (task demands). These findings are consistent with research in Western countries (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Van Hoye & Saks, 2011), indicating that the symbolic traits that job seekers associate with organizations might be the key determinants of organizational attraction.

Although our results indicate that the main findings with respect to the instrumental-symbolic framework in Western individualistic cultures can be generalized to a non-Western collectivistic culture such as Turkey, it should be noted that only one country was included in the present study. Therefore, future research should further investigate the cross-cultural generalizability of the instrumental-symbolic framework by applying it in other countries and cultures. Furthermore, in addition to country scores, measuring individual scores on cultural
dimensions might enhance our insight into the implications of cultural values for the instrumental-symbolic framework (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2010).

In terms of other limitations and directions for future research, our sample consisted of university students asked to identify their most admired employer. More research is needed to examine whether our findings generalize to other types of job seekers and employers. In addition, our cross-sectional design prevents drawing causal conclusions. However, our approach is consistent with previous research that has examined employer image as a precursor of attraction and not vice versa (Lievens, 2007). Nonetheless, it would be interesting for future research to apply a longitudinal design with multiple time waves. Not only would this shed more light on the causal relationships between employer image and attraction, it would also allow to better grasp the dynamic nature of this relationship as it might change over time with individuals moving through the recruitment, selection, and socialization process.

With respect to practical implications, our results show that the instrumental-symbolic framework can be applied to better understand employer image and attraction in both Western and non-Western countries. Therefore, organizations should base their recruitment activities on the results of an image audit, similar to the one conducted in the present study. Such an image audit should include instrumental attributes as well as symbolic meanings that people associate with the organization. In addition, recruitment should subsequently focus on those image dimensions that both relate to organizations’ attractiveness as an employer and help to stand out from competing employers in the labor market.
References


Table 1  
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Study Variables  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
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<td>1. Industry a</td>
<td>.57</td>
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<td>2. Pay/security</td>
<td>3.71</td>
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<td>3. Advancement</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.75**</td>
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<td>4. Task demands</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.66**</td>
<td>.77**</td>
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<td>5. Working conditions</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.63**</td>
<td>.63**</td>
<td>.66**</td>
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<td>Symbolic image</td>
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<td>6. Sincerity</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.47**</td>
<td>.69**</td>
<td>.64**</td>
<td>.52**</td>
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<td>7. Innovativeness</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td>.71**</td>
<td>.72**</td>
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<td>.81**</td>
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<td>8. Competence</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.41**</td>
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<td>9. Prestige</td>
<td>3.70</td>
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<td>.04</td>
<td>.47**</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>.84**</td>
<td>.70**</td>
<td>.51**</td>
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<td>10. Robustness</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.48**</td>
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<td>.56**</td>
<td>.57**</td>
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<td>11. Attractiveness</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.13</td>
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<td>.32**</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.18**</td>
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Note. N = 206.  
a0 = manufacturing, 1 = service.  
* p < .05. **p < .01.
Table 2

Regression of Organizational Attractiveness on Instrumental and Symbolic Image Dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>β</th>
<th>ΔR²</th>
<th>Relative weights</th>
<th>Percentages of predictable variance (%)</th>
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<td>Industry a</td>
<td>.12</td>
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<td>6.3</td>
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Note. N = 206.

*a* 0 = manufacturing, 1 = service.

* *p < .05. **p < .01.
### Table 3

**Image Dimensions of Top Five Most Admired Companies and Within-Group Structure Coefficients for Discriminant Functions**

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*Note.* Within-group structure coefficients > .50 are underlined.

* *p < .05. ** *p < .01.