The Effect of Race Similarity on Job Applicant Attraction and Pursuit Intentions

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ABSTRACT

It is important to attract minority applicants and attain the benefits of a diverse workforce. This study aims to contribute to existing literature by investigating the effect of actual race similarity on applicant attraction and pursuit intentions and the mediating role of perceived similarity in these relationships. Two hundred and twenty four Malaysian Chinese university students participated in this study. The findings suggested that Chinese applicants were more likely to be attracted to and pursue organisations featuring a homogenous Chinese or a racially diverse group of employees, than organisations featuring a homogenous Malay group in a job advertisement. Furthermore, perceived race similarity mediated these relationships. Hence, the inclusion of minority representatives in job advertisements is beneficial in attracting minority applicants.

Key words: valuing diversity, workforce diversity, workplace representation of diverse groups

As the talent pool today is shrinking yet becoming increasingly diverse, many organisations are striving to become the employer of choice particularly in the eyes of minority group applicants. By capitalising on the different strengths, capabilities, skills, and knowledge within a diverse applicant pool, employers are likely to attain sustainable competitive advantage through a workforce that is valuable and inimitable (Richard 2000). Organisations need to actively convey and practise diversity values so that minority group applicants will be attracted to work for them.

Studies have shown that minority group members are more likely to be attracted to organisations that feature minority representatives in their advertisements (Avery 2003; Avery, Hernandez & Hebl 2004; Perkins, Thomas & Taylor 2000). Racially similar individuals tend to categorise and perceive themselves as belonging to the same group (i.e. in-group) and others as out-group. They show greater liking for similar others in order to enhance their social identity (Tajfel & Turner 1986; Turner 1987). Consistent with the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne 1971), individuals are attracted to others who are similar to them in terms of demographic attributes, personal values, and attitudes.

The majority of past studies have emphasised actual similarity, paying little attention to the perception of similarity, as conceptualised by Harrison, Price and Bell (1998). There are two types of perceived similarity: surface-level similarity, which captures the similarity of demographic attributes such as race, and deep-level similarity, which involves the similarity of less observable attributes such as values and attitudes (Harrison et al. 1998). It is important to study perceived similarity as past
researchers suggested that the effect of actual similarity on attraction may be facilitated by the extent to which the individual believes him/ herself as similar to the other person (Goldberg 2005; Riordan 2000).

The present study aims to contribute to the literature in the following ways. First, this study will explicitly test the similarity-attraction hypothesis by proposing perceived similarity as the mediator in the relationship between actual race similarity and applicant attraction. Previous studies have used the similarity paradigm as the explanatory mechanism yet it has not been examined empirically. Furthermore, past studies have focused on examining the effect of similarity on work outcomes (e.g. co-worker satisfaction, task performance; Cunningham 2007; Harrison, Price, Gavin & Florey 2002) with less attention on pre-hire outcomes (e.g. applicant attraction, pursuit intentions).

Second, past research suggested that the effect of similarity may be more significant in some cultures than others (Wiersema & Bird 1993); thus, this study will examine the effect of race similarity using Chinese in Malaysia. Chinese have been a demographic minority in Malaysia but the Chinese enjoy a higher social status than the majority Malays due to a range of historical and cultural factors. This situation is in contrast to Western societies where the numerical majority usually attains a higher status than the minority group. Thus, it will be fruitful to test if the reactions of Malaysian Chinese towards race composition at work are similar to those of the minority group members in the Western context.

Third, previous research showed that a Black applicant’s attraction to an organisation increases as the proportion of Black models featured in the advertisement increases from 10% to 50% (Perkins et al. 2000). However, whether minority applicant attraction increases when the proportion of Blacks exceeds Whites remains unanswered. This present study aims to fill in this research gap by examining the reactions of the minority Chinese towards an organisation that features a homogenous group of Chinese representatives (100% Chinese), in comparison with organisations presenting lower proportions of Chinese representatives (50% and 0% Chinese).

The overall research model and proposed relationships among study variables are presented in Figure 1. Race composition is predicted to have an indirect effect on applicant attraction and pursuit intentions, with perceived similarity as the mediator.
Diversity Recruitment

Diversity recruitment research is grounded in two theoretical perspectives: the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne 1971) and the social identity theory/social categorisation perspectives (Tajfel & Turner 1986; Turner 1987). The similarity-attraction paradigm proposes that individuals who are similar in terms of demographic attributes, attitudes, or values will feel greater liking to one another (Byrne 1971). Previous research has shown that demographic similarity increases liking and job satisfaction (Riordan & Weatherly 1999), and fosters positive relationships and rapport (Linnehan, Chrobot-Mason & Konrad 2006; Turban, Dougherty & Lee 1999).

The social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1986) and the social categorisation perspective (Turner 1987) propose that individuals categorise themselves and others according to socially meaningful demographic groups such as race (i.e. White versus Black). In order to enhance self-identity, individuals maximise the differences between two groups (Kramer 1991). They perceive individuals who belong to the same group (i.e. in-group) as more attractive than individuals who belong to another group (i.e. out-group; in-group favouritism; Whittler & Spira 2002). Furthermore, out-group members are often viewed as less trustworthy, honest, and cooperative (Brewer 1979; Tajfel 1982).

Organisations attract minority applicants through the diversity signals they convey during recruitment activities. These activities can signal to applicants that the organisation values diversity and that minority employees are an important part of its workforce. For instance, some organisations
include Equal Employment Opportunity statements in their recruitment materials or utilise racially
diverse recruiters during job interviews. Minority applicants may be attracted to these organisations
because they perceive that individuals like them are valued by the organisation. Diversity statements
(Highhouse, Stierwalt, Bachiochi, Elder & Fisher 1999; Williams & Bauer 1994) and recruiter
characteristics (Goldberg 2003; Wyse 1972) both influence applicant attraction.

Another strategy commonly used by organisations to attract minority applicants is the
inclusion of minority employees in job advertisements. Perkins and colleagues (2000) examined the
effect of race composition on students’ rating of organisational attractiveness, perceived compatibility
between an individual and the organisation, and favourability of the organisation’s image. Race
composition was manipulated by the ratio of Black to White employees represented in the
advertisement. Black employees were represented as 0%, 10%, 30%, or 50% of the total 10
employees. Black students reported a higher level of attractiveness when there was at least one Black
employee (i.e. 10% of the total employees) depicted in the advertisement. Furthermore, the ratings on
those three outcome variables increased as the proportion of the Black employees increased (Perkins
et al. 2000).

An integration of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1986) and the similarity-attraction
paradigm (Byrne, 1971) suggests that applicants will categorise racially similar employees as in-group
members and dissimilar employees as out-group members, and they will be more attracted to
organisations featuring racially similar employees. Studies showed that individuals are more attracted
to organisations that have a group of individuals who are demographically similar to them (Riordan
2000) or organisations that have a greater proportion of in-group members. They may reinforce their
positive self-identity by identifying with co-workers who are similar to them (Tajfel & Turner 1986).

Hence, it is predicted that:

*Hypothesis 1. Chinese applicants will be more attracted to (Hypothesis 1a) and more likely to
pursue (Hypothesis 1b) organisations that feature a homogenous group of Chinese representatives or
a racially diverse group of representatives in the advertisement, as compared to a homogenous group
of Malay representatives.*
The Mediating Role of Perceived Similarity

In contrast to actual similarity which is based on an objective evaluation of two or more individuals’ attributes, perceived similarity refers to the extent to which individuals think and believe that they are similar to others (Kirchmeyer 1995; Turban & Jones 1988). Actual similarity may or may not lead to perceived similarity depending on whether the individual has attributed personal psychological meaning to those demographic similarities (Riordan 2000).

One of the earliest studies establishing the link between actual and perceived similarity was the research conducted by Harrison and colleagues (2002). They found that actual surface-level and actual deep-level similarity predicted perceived surface-level and perceived deep-level similarity respectively. Along similar lines, a more recent study found that actual race and age dissimilarity was positively related to perceived race and age dissimilarity (Cunningham 2007). This suggests that actual race similarity may predict applicant’s perceived race similarity.

Furthermore, actual similarity in race may lead to perceived deep-level similarity on dimensions such as values, personality, and attitudes. As suggested by Chattopadhyay (1999), applicants may be more attracted to demographically similar groups because they believe that members of such groups possess similar values as them. In line with the social categorisation theory (Turner 1987), individuals who are racially similar are more likely to view themselves as having similar attitudes, beliefs, and personal experiences (Riordan 2000). Hence, it is hypothesised that:

*Hypothesis 2. Chinese applicants will perceive themselves as more racially similar (Hypothesis 2a) and more similar in terms of values, personality and attitudes (Hypothesis 2b) to employees of an organisation that features a homogenous group of Chinese representatives or a diverse group of representatives in the advertisement, than a homogenous group of Malay representatives.*

Based on the similarity-attraction paradigm, actual similarity fosters perceived global similarity which in turn predicts positive interpersonal experiences (Huang & Iun 2006). Applicants may be more likely to be attracted to an organisation featuring a group of racially similar employees as they believe that people in the organisation are more similar to them, which in turn leads to their intentions to seek organisational membership with the employing organisation (Riordan 2000). Based
on the previous research, perceived similarity is predicted to be an intervening variable in the relationship between actual race similarity and outcome variables (James & Brett 1984).

Hypothesis 3. The effect of actual race similarity on applicant attraction (Hypothesis 3a) and pursuit intentions (Hypothesis 3b) will be mediated by perceived race similarity.

Hypothesis 4. The effect of actual race similarity on applicant attraction (Hypothesis 4a) and pursuit intentions (Hypothesis 4b) will be mediated by perceived deep-level similarity.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Two hundred and twenty four Malaysian Chinese university students participated in this study. The majority of the participants were female ($N = 143$; 63.84%) and most participants were between 18 and 25 years old ($M = 20.42$, $SD = 1.25$). All participants were enrolled in courses at private universities in Malaysia and the majority were in their undergraduate or Honours studies ($N = 207$; 92.41%)

Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to examine the effect of different advertisements on organisational attractiveness. They were given an information sheet describing the study, a consent form, and the survey. The survey took about 20 minutes to complete and participants were thanked and given a small chocolate at the end of the session.

Manipulation and Measures

Three job advertisements (i.e. ads) were created based upon information obtained from the web pages of multinational organisations in Malaysia. All three ads similarly depict the recruiting effort by an organisation named Soroton Inc. The ads briefly describe Soroton Inc. as an organisation that produces a wide range of goods and products and an employer that provides a good package of career opportunities. Following the organisation description, four employee testimonials were presented. The content of the organisation information and testimonials of the employees were held constant across all three ads.

The only variation across the three ads was the race composition of the employees making the testimonials. Beside each testimonial, the ad presented the picture and name of the employee who had made the comments. Both the picture and the name cued the employee’s race. Employee pictures and
names had been pilot tested to ensure that all employees were perceived as moderately attractive and
their names were clearly Chinese or Malay. Two male and two female employees were used in each
ad. There were three race composition conditions: 100% Chinese (i.e. two Chinese males and two
Chinese females), 50% Malays-50% Chinese or Diverse (i.e. one Malay male and one Malay female;
one Chinese male and one Chinese female), and 100% Malays (i.e. two Malay males and two Malay
females). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three race composition conditions and
they were not aware of the other conditions.

The survey was written in English as English is used as the main teaching medium in most of
the universities in Malaysia. There were four continuous variables included in the survey and all items
were measured using a Likert scale (‘1 = strongly disagree’; ‘7 = strongly agree’).

Perceived surface-level similarity. Perceived surface-level similarity was measured by a
single item: ‘With respect to race, I think I am very similar to the employees who work at Soroton
Inc.’.

Perceived deep-level similarity. Three items were developed based on Cunningham’s (2007)
and Harrison and colleagues’ (1998) conceptualisation of perceived deep-level similarity. The items
measured the degree to which participants perceived themselves as similar to the people working in
the organisation in terms of personality, personal values, and attitudes. A sample item was: ‘With
respect to personality, I think I am very similar to the employees who work at Soroton Inc.’. The
internal consistency of this measure was .86.

Applicant attraction. Participants’ attraction to the organisation was measured using the three-
item scale developed by Fisher, Ilgen, and Hoyer (1979). A sample item was: ‘Soroton Inc. is
attractive to me as a place for employment’. The internal consistency of this measure was .87.

Pursuit intentions. Participants’ intentions to pursue a job in the organisation were measured
using the six-item scale adapted from Aiman-Smith, Bauer, and Cable (2001). A sample item was: ‘If
Soroton Inc. was at a job fair I would seek out their booth’. The internal reliability of this measure
was .85.
RESULTS

Zero-order Correlations

The means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables are shown in Table 1. All zero-order correlations were in the expected direction.

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Zero-order Correlations among the Major Variables in the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Perceived Surface-level Similarity</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Perceived Deep-level Similarity</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>.39***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Applicant Attraction</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>.44***</td>
<td>.48***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Pursuit Intentions</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.46***</td>
<td>.43***</td>
<td>.62***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 224; ***p < .001, two-tailed.

Tests of Hypotheses

Main effects of race composition. Hypotheses 1 (a & b) and 2 (a & b) predicted that participants who viewed ads featuring a homogenous group of Chinese representatives or a racially diverse group of representatives would show a higher level of attraction, job pursuit intentions, perceived surface-level similarity, and perceived deep-level similarity, than participants who viewed a homogenous group of Malay representatives. One-way Analyses of Variance (i.e. ANOVA) were conducted where race composition was entered as the factor and the four outcome variables were entered as dependent variables. As predicted, race composition had statistically significant effects on participants’ ratings of attraction \([F(2, 221) = 14.94, p < .001]\), job pursuit intentions \([F(2, 221) = 13.33, p < .001]\), perceived surface-level similarity \([F(2, 221) = 63.98, p < .001]\), and perceived deep-level similarity \([F(2, 221) = 8.55, p < .001]\).

Figure 2 shows the condition means for applicant attraction and pursuit intentions. Both dependent variables showed the same pattern of results across conditions. Specifically, Chinese applicants were significantly more attracted to the organisation that featured a homogenous group of Chinese representatives.
Chinese representatives \((M = 4.77; SD = .84)\) than the organisation that features a homogenous group of Malay representatives \((M = 3.97; SD = 1.06)\) but not significantly more attracted to the organisation that features a group of racially diverse representatives \((M = 4.66; SD = .98)\). Similarly, participants who viewed the 100% Chinese ad indicated a significantly higher level of pursuit intentions \((M = 5.07; SD = .77)\) than participants who viewed the 100% Malay ad \((M = 4.38; SD = .95)\) but not significantly higher than those who viewed the Diverse ad \((M = 5.01; SD = .96)\).

**Figure 2: The Mean Score of Participants’ Attraction and Pursuit Intentions across Three Race Composition Conditions**

Figure 3 shows the condition means for perceived surface-level similarity and perceived deep-level similarity. All possible pair-wise comparisons for surface-level similarity were statistically significant. Specifically, the 100% Chinese ad was rated as the highest \((M = 5.36; SD = 1.06)\) followed by the Diverse ad \((M = 4.60; SD = 1.12)\) and then the 100% Malay ad \((M = 3.12; SD = 1.43)\). However, in the rating of perceived deep-level similarity, the only significant pair-wise comparison was between participants who viewed the 100% Chinese ad \((M = 4.68; SD = .96)\) and those who viewed the 100% Malay ad \((M = 3.97; SD = 1.14)\).
Mediating role of perceived surface-level similarity. To test the mediation hypotheses of perceived surface-level similarity (Hypotheses 3a & 3b), two Analyses of Covariance (i.e. ANCOVA) were performed using perceived surface-level similarity as a covariate, and treating applicant attraction and pursuit intentions as dependent variables. The results showed that, upon the entry of perceived surface-level similarity as a covariate, the main effect of race composition became non-significant for applicant attraction, $F(2, 220) = 1.88$, $ns$ and pursuit intentions, $F(2, 220) = 1.32$, $ns$. Furthermore, the effect of perceived surface-level similarity was significant for both applicant attraction $F(1, 220) = 23.77$, $p < .001$ and pursuit intentions $F(1, 220) = 31.91$, $p < .001$. Thus, Hypotheses 3a and 3b were supported.

Mediating role of perceived deep-level similarity. Two parallel ANCOVAs were performed using perceived deep-level similarity as the covariate. The findings showed that, upon the entry of perceived deep-level similarity as a covariate, the main effect of race composition remained significant for applicant attraction, $F(2, 220) = 8.68$, $p < .001$ and pursuit intentions, $F(2, 220) = 7.95$, $p < .001$. The effect of perceived deep-level similarity was also significant for both applicant
attraction $F(1, 220) = 50.75, p < .001$ and pursuit intentions $F(1, 220) = 36.97, p < .001$. Thus, Hypotheses 4a and 4b were not supported.

**DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of race similarity on applicant attraction and pursuit intentions and the role of perceived similarity as a mediator in these relationships. It aimed to contribute to the literature by empirically testing the similarity-attraction paradigm using perceived similarity as the mediator. Furthermore, it extended previous findings and investigated whether minority applicants will be attracted to minority-dominated organisations (i.e. when the proportion of minority members in the organisation exceeds the majority). Given that minority Chinese in Malaysia have a relatively high social status, we expected that Chinese applicants would be more attracted to organisations that have featured a homogenous group of Chinese employees or a group of racially diverse employees, but less attracted to organisations that have featured a homogenous group of Malay employees.

As predicted, Chinese applicants were more attracted to, and more likely to pursue a job in an organisation featuring a homogenous group of Chinese or a group of racially diverse employees than an organisation featuring a homogenous group of Malay employees. Furthermore, the organisation featuring a homogenous group of Chinese was rated as the most attractive. This shows that participants’ attraction to the organisation remained high even when the proportion of minority group members exceeded the majority. This sheds light on the current literature and supports the similarity-attraction hypothesis (Byrne 1971). Individuals will be attracted to similar others and more likely to seek employment relationships with organisations that have featured a group of racially similar employees in their advertisement.

As expected, we found that Chinese applicants perceive employees who work at an organisation featuring a homogenous group of Chinese employees to be more racially similar to them and also more similar in terms of values, personality, and attitudes. This finding is in line with past research demonstrating that actual demographic similarity is related to perceived demographic similarity (Cunningham 2007; Harrison et al. 2002). The finding also supports the proposition that
individuals expect racially similar others to share their own values, attitudes, and experiences (Riordan 2000).

Based on the similarity-attraction paradigm, we predicted that perceived surface-level similarity would mediate the effect of actual race similarity on applicant attraction and pursuit intentions. The findings supported our propositions. This underlines the importance of perceived similarity and confirms the mediating role of perceived similarity in the actual similarity and attraction relationship (Cunningham 2007; Harrison et al. 2002). Individuals attribute meanings to actual demographic similarities and it is these attributions that lead to subsequent behaviours and attitudes, such as attraction (Riordan 2000). When an organisation features minority members in their recruitment ads, minority applicants may believe that the organisation values diversity and its minority employees, leading to greater applicant attraction.

In contrast to our prediction, the extent to which Chinese applicants believed that the group of representatives featured in the ad shared their own values, attitudes, and experiences did not alter their attraction toward the organisation. In other words, perceived deep-level similarity did not mediate the effect of actual race similarity on applicant attraction and pursuit intentions. This may reflect the fact that our participants (i.e. university students) were in their early stages of the career search. Applicants who are in an early stage of recruitment may be more affected by direct and observable attributes (e.g. race of the employees) in their job choice decisions, than by indirect and unobservable attributes (e.g. employees’ personal values). Research suggests that surface-level similarity has greater effects than deep-level similarity during a relationship’s early stages (Harrison et al. 2002).

In this study, no information was presented about actual deep-level attributes to parallel the actual race similarity information. For example, the extent to which an applicant’s personal values match the actual organisation’s values capture actual deep-level similarity, while the extent to which the applicant believes that his/ her values match with the organisation’s values capture perceived deep-level similarity. Perceived similarity may mediate the actual similarity and attraction relationship only when the actual and perceived similarities reflect the same underlying dimension. Studies showed that actual deep-level similarity, but not surface-level similarity, predicted perceived
deep-level similarity, which in turn leads to social integration among employees (Harrison et al. 2002). Hence, future research should integrate and examine the effect of actual deep-level similarity.

There were several limitations in this study. First, the data were collected from a single source and a student sample was used. These factors restrict the generalisability of the study findings to the actual labour market. Future research should recruit actual applicants and study their job pursuit behaviour (i.e. not just intentions to pursue). Furthermore, actual organisation race composition may be used to develop a measure of actual similarity between applicants and the organisation’s employees. Second, this study only examined Chinese applicants. Future research should include other racial groups such as Malay in Malaysia. It will be fruitful to examine if Malays as the majority group in the society will be attracted to Chinese-dominated organisations. Malays may be attracted to Chinese-dominated organisations in order to achieve instrumental benefits resulting from the relatively high status of Chinese in Malaysia. Finally, this study assumed that the applicants were using race as an important demographic attribute in their self-definitions. Future research should measure the salience of racial identity of participants. Applicants with high identification would be even more strongly attracted to organisations featuring members of their own race than their counterparts who are low in identification (Linnehan et al. 2006).

This study provides several practical implications. Clearly, race composition in a job ad influences applicant responses. Hence, organisations should include minority members in the recruitment material in order to appear attractive, at least from the minority group perspective. Studies have been consistently shown that on the one hand, minority applicants are more attracted to an organisation that includes minority employees in its recruiting ads than an organisation that excludes. On the other hand, the majority group applicants are not affected by the organisation’s diversity (Avery 2003; Perkins et al. 2000). Hence, job ads including minority employees may attract both majority and minority applicants. Furthermore, the inclusion of minority group members in the ad may also attract members of other minority groups not featured in the ad. Avery and colleagues (2004) found that both Black and Hispanic participants were attracted to organisations using ads featuring a minority representative (Black or Hispanic). This highlights how important it is that organisations foster the perceived similarity of minority applicants in addition to promoting the actual similarity.
For example, organisations should ensure that target applicants are well-informed and encouraged to see themselves as similar to the existing workforce and as good fits to the organisational culture.
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