A fuzzy look at bias in hiring practices, Thailand

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Abstract: *Hiring practices contains some form of bias, with awareness and acknowledgement reducing its effects. The requirement of a photograph has been shown to promote bias in hiring (beautiful as good) however in Thailand many companies do not seem to think so. Fifty companies' recruiters were asked in a semi-structured questionnaire about the practice of asking for photographs from job applicants, with only four recruiters acknowledging the potential for bias as literature shows. When pressed further for the rationale for using photograph the responses ranged from surprised, casual ignorance ("normal practice") to being offended. Several recruiters were not aware of staffing practices outside Thailand. Answers as to why photographs are required and how they are used were not clearly answered with many recruiters giving contradictory statements ("need but not important").*

Reactions to questioning, however, raised many questions as to the influence of culture, education, reading and other habits of hiring personnel in Thailand. Also, questions should be raised about bias in hiring surrounding company performance, internationalization, and modernization of Thai companies. This study provides a framework for those interested in Thai companies' hiring practices, areas of bias and to lessen the impact on company's performance.

Keywords: *Hiring bias, resume photograph, recruitment, Thailand*

1. Introduction

Companies looking to employ the best candidates should make the effort to recruit the best, however, bias at the hiring stage may prevent companies from achieving their stated aims. By including an unnecessary and subjective requirement, a company may be including inefficiencies to the hiring process and eliminating potential candidates at the initial screening stage based on looks. Przygogzki-Lionet, Olivier, and Desrumaux (2010) summarized earlier findings where the

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"what is beautiful is good" bias exist showing that attractive applicants are seen as more competent, qualified and perform better quality work. Even with abundant literature on bias caused by facial attractiveness, the continuation of requesting photographs by Thai based companies in the application stage needs to be looked at in more detail. Why the practice is still ongoing, what are the impacts and how can companies get the most appropriate individual and impact on company performance are discussed in the following sections.

2. Literature

A plethora of literature exists discussing the relationship between facial attractiveness and candidate selection. Papers focusing on Asian and specifically Thailand are rare. One interesting finding in the literature though (for example, using Google Scholar database) is the tendency to focus on the impact of looks on female job seekers rather than men. This literature section will touch on a few papers to highlight key points and not try to repeat what is largely known or written.

Chiu and Babcock (2002) showed that facial attractiveness carried more weight than grade point average and public examination results in Hong Kong. Boo et al (2013) showed that unattractive candidates had to work 36% more to get similar consideration. Niu et al (2018) showed that in the Chinese nursing industry though officially discrimination based on looks does not exist, in practice the lookism does. Chelcea and Ivan (2016) stated, though lookism, which generally have a negative connotation, and physical appearance matters in Asia, the phenomenon is global.

Fazio and Lei (2015) found, "unattractive faces need to put in 33 percent more applications than their attractive counterparts to obtain the same number of interview callbacks." Busetta et al. (2013) found significant statistical evidence of attractive faces getting more callbacks from companies and recruiters. Many authors also point out women getting more calls than men and race also being a factor regarding a callback. Von Stockhausen, Koeser, and Sczesny (2013) built upon earlier research and showed that hiring decision based on social roles were influenced by subtle features and characteristics of facial appearance.

Aumeboonsuke (2018) showed the self-perception is also influenced by how attractive one is perceived. That perception is carried further into national affairs. Warhust et al. (2009) point out the Chinese navy wanted good-looking and well-mannered personnel to help project the country's image abroad. Thus, looks mattered. The purpose was clearly explained along with a rationale. Image projection is seen as necessary by both business and national interest.

Bruton (2015) however argued that looks-based hiring should not be seen as discrimination alone but rather an acknowledge marketing tool that helps the company stand out (for example Abercrombie and Fitch). Wu and Hwang (2012) showed a relationship between perceived attractiveness and customer satisfaction leading to better-perceived attributes by hairdressers in Taiwan. Business may thus have a reason for including looks as a component in the hiring process.

Awareness and acknowledgment of bias with reason thus are permissible within reason, though admittedly, that mark may be difficult to establish.

3. Method

A university recruitment fair was held over two days in March 2018 in which 109 companies participated. Semi-structured questions were asked or presented to recruiters aiming to understand why photos were requested and how the pictures are used. Repeat questions (two and four, three and six) were used as confirmatory questions to highlight the understanding of the process. Considering that photos would not be used, two questions (10 and 11) were added to understand the reasoning. Questionnaires were handed out as some recruiters expressed a preference for filling out the form and point to the convenience to them instead of interrupting the conversation during the event. Approximately 40% were asked the open-ended questions directly while others choose to fill in the survey form themselves. The bilingual form is shown in Appendix A. A bilingual approach was chosen to allow respondents expressive freedom in their native language and accommodate those who are not able to understand English. Also, by having the questionnaire in two languages allowed a greater potential understanding of the aims of the study. Two Thai speakers (one lecturer and one administrative staff), and not the author, were involved in the translating the questions from English to Thai and answer from Thai to English.

The leading researcher (a lecturer) and ten undergraduate students administered the questionnaires over the two-day period. One reason for using undergraduate student was to introduce them to data collection and research. Thus, observational input (reactions to questions, body language, etc.) is thus limited. During the debriefing, some students mentioned the surprise on the interviewees' face when posed with some of the questions. Thus, still being able to gather some observational input for the study.

A simple approach focusing on more qualitative responses was chosen to give the respondents more opportunities to express themselves. Also, with a subjective topic allowing person room for expression would better capture the understanding of the topic. Having a clean slate would also help in help define future studies as word choices can be examined and better questions developed.

Analysis followed observing themes, common ideas, words and phrases, after the reading details of all responses. Using a thematic approach help in comparing answers and compiling the information so categories and relationships can be better established. Answers to each questions were compared and within each questionnaire relationships among answers sought.

4. Findings

Forty-six companies said they wanted an applicant's photo to some degree. Half the recruiters said that photographs were not essential but yet still wanted, "to see the personality" of the person applying for the job. However, no one could explain what is meant by personality, with "well-groom," "formal" and "nice" the closest words used. Personality appeared several times in responses as to its relationship to the candidates' ability no one was able to provide linkage. The

closest explanation refers those employees at a bank interacting with high net worth individuals who can be demanding.

The second most important reason for requesting a photo is for those persons working in sales or customer facing positions, "to give a good image to the customer." One respondent said, "some think that a good-looking salesperson increases sales volumes." Zebrowitz, Tenenbaum, and Goldstein (1991) showed that the behavior of selecting applicants for roles depending on their looks, hence, a baby-faced female were selected for jobs requiring warmth or submission. Stereotypical associations of roles and looks continues today in Thailand. Chelcea and Ivan (2016) showed that there are some basis for looks bias, with a study conducted in Taipei, Taiwan showing ratings of service were higher when the waitresses were considered to have higher physical attractiveness.

However, there was some practical rationale for wanting a photo such as matching the job seeker to open positions such as engineers required to work on electrical lines need to be agile and not fat. Physical fitness for the role. Photos were also used for preparing company's identification card, filling insurance documentation, and criminal background checks. The practical nature can be seen in keeping with company image, for example, Hooters, Playboy or Abercrombie and Fitch, where a significant part of the company's branding (and by extension revenue) comes from its employees looks. The transgender issue also plays a part where balancing gender issues in the workplace is a concern. Thais are required to register their birth gender and not allowed to change even if the sex transition is ongoing or completed.

A common reason for asking for photos was, "we have always asked." Some companies' representative said they do not see the need for photos as the near standard requirement of Thai ID card already had a photo on it. Also, persons can be seen via their social media usage or when they come for an interview. However, since the form had space allotted for a photo, the requirement remained.

Twenty headhunters mentioned that if a photo was not given on the applications, one could be given later. Four explicitly said they would ignore the resume. The need, however, was for some form of visual confirmation of who the person is even if it meant taking the photo themselves during the interview or getting one from social media.

None of the recruiters interviewed could show a relationship between photo and job performance. Education and skills related to job performance but photos no. Yet, the demand for a photo is still there. This contradiction reinforces the idea of why ask for something that is not related to job performance. As Jackson (2004) pointed out the contradictions in Thai society is multifaceted.

When given the option of hiring either of two persons, a good-looking bachelor holder versus a not good-looking master's holder, six representatives said they would hire the handsome person, and six said the master's holder explicitly. Other answers given included the ability to fit in

company culture, get along with managers, and salary demands. The most common comment (eight responses) was "we do not hire on looks but based on capability."

Besides photos and resumes, companies use examinations, English test and other methods to select candidates, but most prefer the interviews only. There is thus some attempt at selecting candidates based on fitness for the role however the first phase of elimination may have already culled more competent individuals.

Ten respondents plainly said that photos have no impact on the candidate with ten saying that photos help in assessing personality. Only one person mentioned that photo might lead to discrimination. Most respondents appear to think that there is no impact (such as psychological stress) on the candidate. One company mentioned that candidates tend to use their best-looking photos anyway and applicants look less appealing in person. Lee (2006) showed that in Korea (and other parts of Asia), plastic surgery is common as a way for job applicants to look more appealing to companies. The idea of plastic surgery may not be an issue at the University employment phase in Thailand yet, but is a factor in other countries. The awareness of what job seekers may do appears limited. Also requesting photos appears to give the companies a way to recognize the job seeker's, their personality and readiness for the job. No one mentioned that the company might hire the wrong person due to beauty bias.

Of the four companies that explicitly state they do not request a photo, three gave rationales. One said that the national identification card already has a photo. Two others were international companies that followed their parent company's standard. However, they did mention that Thais use photos on CV even when not required. Thais university (and other schools) graduates are encouraged to use "good" photos when applying for jobs.

Another interesting point is that traditional culture use physiognomy to assess persons. Four persons mentioned the word "physiognomy" in their rationale for photos. Face reading has been used, and though not directly dependent on look (handsome or not) a photograph can help in the assessment process. Hassin and Trope (2000) define physiognomy as "…. the art of reading personality traits from faces….," adding it dates from the ancient Greeks and still used today. Using traditional methods does raise some conflict with modern hiring evaluation techniques. Plastic surgery may be seen as changing the personality of the person and challenging the face reader's ability. Shin (2012), a professional in physiognomy, says that plastic surgery influences a person's character but does not change their true self which is what the face reader sees.

One important point raised was the impact of transgender in society and hiring. Thus, though on official documents male names and titles are used if a female person arrives in for an interview

it is difficult to tell whom to expect. Catering for transgender is important for some companies and some roles thus awareness of candidates' gender leaning may help in identifying suitability.

Many of the participants did not directly answer the questions asked instead seeking to give an ideal opinion rather than address the issues. For example, questions 10 and 11 were specifically designed for companies that do not want photos yet fifteen of these questions were filled out.

5. Discussion

Despite the claim that photos were not important and did not influence hiring the demand for photos still dominate. The repeated comments of "to see the personality" highlighted larger issues. What exactly is personality? Grooming and appearing neat topped the descriptions when pressed but, as mentioned, people tend to use their best-looking picture when applying. Why request something that is not important and can be given later for all practical purposes. As pointed out by some employers, the Thai national identification card contain a photograph already. There may be unnecessary extra steps being added to evaluation phase

Pushing for answers showed that many of the frontend recruiting personnel were not willing to question the practice of using photos and the concept of bias was ignored. Several persons mentioned that bias and selecting beautiful person would not be done but could not give an explanation as to "how" they eliminate the potential for bias. A few body language showed that they were offended and shock that there could be bias in hiring based on beauty. Everyone wanted to be seen as fair and neutral. However, five persons showed that bias may an issue when using photos. In question seven (good-looking versus higher education) five persons said they would choose the good-looking thus there is evidence that preference do exist. Niu et al. (2018) highlighted that awareness and sensitivity to the issue of looks based hiring was significant especially when looking for staff in critical functions. Chelcea and Ivan (2016) pointed out in Europe there is that there is the issue of looks in hiring but there is a greater acknowledgement of the impact of looks on the decision-making process.

A good-looking salesperson seems more important than a competent one. Over sixty percent of respondents mentioned that photos are required for customer-facing staff. However, as one person articulated, there may be the expectation of higher sales volumes. Yet, knowledgeability did not seem to feature highly in the requirement. A recruiter, at a mechanical engineering firm that modifies heavy lift vehicles, mentioned that salespersons were required to be good looking. Questioned further about technical ability to answer questions buyers may have, the use of support staff came in. Aumeboonsuke (2018) discussed the impact the perception that attractiveness has on the employee's behavior with the more attractive people being more motivated (which may be a response to their treatment). Burton (2015) showed that some employers argue that a form of productivity measure is customer satisfaction which in some cases is based on physical appearance; thus, employment on looks cannot be seen as discrimination.

How to define personality is very vague and what happens when the company's impression is wrong. For example, a person can look well groom and presented in the photo but in daily life might

be unkept and have habits that include pilfering. These behaviors are difficult to tell or assess from pictures. During the data collection, no one was able to explain what personality was or what happens if (or when) his or her interpretation is off. Though the idea is there, the definition is akin to that of pornography ("I will know it when I see it"). Traditional use of physiognomy may reinforce the idea that a person facial features can tell about the person. Training in physiognomy is not given by many companies thus instinct, background and awareness may influence a person's perception of personality. Dean (2017) showed that facial appearance profoundly influences patronage intent. There is thus, an influencing factor being talked about with the term personality, but the definition is ambiguous.

One thing to note that is that there is a difference between a good-looking employee (physical attractiveness) and looking good employee (well-groomed and put together by knowing what to wear and carry about oneself). A well-groomed, well-mannered and competent person may have the same or more significant impact on a customer than a simple, good-looking individual. Warhurst et al. (2009) pointed out that the concept of look and appearance awareness is vital in the USA partly because of legal issues and discrimination, particularly in the retail trade. Another subtle difference is highlighted by Hassin and Trope (2000) where "reading from faces" and "reading into faces" are shown to be two sides of the same coin. Slight differences can have an impact on the understanding hence the push by the researcher to get a clear answer.

Applying physiognomy characteristics to those non-Thai or non-Asian faces may prove to be harder for even trained persons. For example, Thai perception of beards or bald head on men may be skewed as most Thais, (by a combination of culture and genetics) do not don beards or shaved heads (except monks). Light skin is seen as beautiful and desirable in Thailand (and Asia gerneally) thus giving those persons an advantage in the job market (Chaipraditkul (2013). With internationalization and opening of greater labor movement within the Association of South East Asian Nations, the current job market approaches in Thailand may hinder getting the best person for the job.

In discussions as to why the study was being considered the question "Why in the USA or France, HR persons can hire without a photo, but Thai still needed?" Several countries the use of photographs is illegal (for example, as discussed by, Burton, 2015, Cavico, Muffler, & Mujtaba, 2012, Warhurst et al., 2009) to eliminate the inherent bias that is associated with pictures. Several recruiters appear not aware of human resources practices outside of Thailand. Thus, personality may be over-rated in Thailand and not needed. Appearance bias may occur in the interview phase outside Thailand but pushed to an earlier phase in locally.

Thai reading habits may also influence the use of photographs. Having to read the details of candidates' application and resume intensively may be considered extra work for some. In the questionnaires administered 11 persons answered questions (10 and 11) that they did not need to. Reading the details and connecting the parts may explain why some choose to use facial appearance rather than read the details. An overview is better than details. Thai reading habits have been discussed by others (such as, Pratontep & Chinwonno, 2008, Strauss, 2009, Tamrakitkun, 2010) which showed most Thais do not conduct extensive or intensive reading. In the "West" keywords and phrases are emphasized for graduates which may indicate the need to attract the human

resources personnel in their quick reading. However, in this Thai case, the photo may simplify the sorting process. Major recruiting websites (www.monster.com, www.reedglobal.com, www.ladders.com, etc.) mention skim-reading through the potentially hundreds of applications. However, this does not seem to be the case in Thailand. Hence the term personality, which may mean, something that catches one's attention via looks.

The veneer of culture that covers most things in Thailand which may hinder progress by trying to optimize what is known. Numerous studies have shown that there is bias in hiring based on looks not acknowledging this bias, Thai human resources professional may be doing themselves, their companies and wider society a disservice. By pushing the idea that "good photos" are required in the application phase my push applicants to focus on looks, invest money, time and other resources to an element that is of little benefit. Twenty employers said photos can be handed in later and not essential but still a requirement. Having things been an established practice many continue with the tradition. Not wanting to challenge status is an element of Thai organizational culture where deference is shown to seniors and establish practices (Pimpa & Hooi, 2014).

Not wanting to be questioned in case of not knowing was apparent with several respondents. Body language (turning away, forcing a smile, frowns, and exasperated looks) occurred in several times during the interview with both the principal researcher and student interviewers. One student reported an interviewee shock and belittling look when asked, "how do you make sure that you are not biased to beautiful people?" in explaining the research rationale. Others use the excuse that they are busy to either terminate or pass on the questioner to another colleague, despite initially agreeing to the interview. Jackson (2004) describes the concept of image in the Thai context where appearance and reputation as important; not knowing takes away from this appearance. So, not being intensely questioned reduces the chances of having to be seen as ignorant of an issue.

Most university textbooks (and courses) discussing Human Resources practices mentions how bias can be introduced into the hiring process. Lessons taught do not seem to be put into practice or remembered. The reminder, by a senior business lecturer, at a 2018 graduating class talk at the university to have one's best photo on one's CV reinforces that disconnect between teaching and practice. Perhaps universities need to evaluate what they teach to make the difference between theory and practice less. Agthe, Spörrle, and Maner (2011) states emphatically (pg. 1042), "The conclusion of this research is apparently quite clear: Being attractive is good for one's career." Reinforcement by others helps to highlight the disconnect between literature and practice by teachers.

Company performance may also be hindered with better candidates being eliminated based on looks or candidates focusing on appearing appealing and not presenting their most competent self. Aspirants' poise may get in the way of showing job suitability. Asking whether a company would hire a good looking versus more qualified contender five said directly they would hire the good-looking individual. Perhaps more might do the same but not admit doing so. If companies are not hiring the best-suited candidate for the role then company performance (income, efficiency, processes, etc.) may not be maximized. Tims, Derks and Bakker (2016) showed the managers should have a good selection process so employees fit the roles required in a meaningful way

emotionally. And by extension contribute positively to the company's performance by being more engaged and committed.

However, a BBC Capital (2018) report showed that for some of China's young posting (and using) beautiful pictures of themselves is seen as a way of showing respect for others. The two-way approach to photos may be circular and a part of the culture. Looking good and good-looking are similar but denying the difference can have a significant impact. Agthe, Spörrle, and Maner (2011) suggested that European countries that uses picture eliminate the step in the application process as the impact on the company may be greater than current research have identified. A broad interpretation can include the effects of bias on the company performance which may be difficult to measure (revenue, growth, performance indicators, and others).

6. Future Research Areas

The impact of video resumes may be accentuating the divide with looks and presentation talent gaining prominence over job specific talent. Appearance may become more dominant in markets such as Thailand where presenting a good image is sometimes more important than substance. Admittedly, video resumes are limited and not used much in Thailand or Asia but following other trends may be an area to consider in the future. Recruitment firms (https://www.manpowerthailand.com) and jobs boards (https://th.jobsdb.com/th) were contacted about the use of video resumes but none gave a reply.

Privacy and identity theft are also factors. As more information before hiring are given to companies how companies protect this data needs to be investigated as rejected and accepted applicants profile can be easily used for criminal activities. Age-based discrimination can be accentuated by looks. The practice already exists in Thailand where age ranges are given, or age asked for. Thus, an older person with young looks may be accepted versus an older person with older looks.

Continued reliance on photographs is promoting other businesses such as cosmetic surgery, image consultants, and even psychologists. Stiles (2017) showed the impact of having a photograph on a resume has on South Korean graduates. Competence and international experience are minimized whereas looks are accentuated causing a cultural shock of sorts for returning Western educated and experienced South Koreans (Stiles).

International candidates would also face problems. With social and cultural norms being dominant in selecting candidates. More research should focus on the hiring of international staff, nationality, looks, competence, and so on. Ghodrati, Joorabchi, and Muati (2015) showed that there is a trend of beauty to be identified along global trends which are heavily influenced by Western media. Thus, the ideal of Caucasian beauty may influence what is required in foreign workers.

Chaipraditkul (2013) discussed the changing nature of what Thais see as beautiful, that is, to a more Western look.

7. Limitations of study

One university event was targeted in Thailand. Having information from more and broader scoped job fairs may help give more depth and better quantitative explanations to the findings of studies looking at hiring practices in Thailand. Thus, expanding research to the wider community might yield more substantive results.

Some jobs, such as models, require facial profiles due to the nature of the role. None of these companies were at the job fair. Thus, looking at companies in the visual media and marketing industry approaches to recruiting may give a different interpretation of the results.

Having more in-depth conversations with strategic HR Managers, who are responsible for policy, would help in explaining more the rationale for photos and the impact on the business and applicant. Policymakers can influence the process and have information on the impact that front-line employees may not be able to communicate.

8. Conclusions

Photographs have a purpose in the hiring process if the use has been clearly stated in the applicant's evaluation. In Thailand, there does not seem much rationale for photographs or awareness of how photographs can bias the hiring process. Employers appear to be adding an unnecessary step and potential for bias in their recruitment process. To what extent this bias is understood and or acknowledge appears to be limited. Staffing practices outside of Thailand and as taught in textbooks also seem to foreign. Being able to articulate the need for a picture was also limited with the vague word "personality" being used; though there is a traditional background to the idea. The impact of the bias on the individual and companies are not considered as the bias itself is not considered (directly) as prejudice but as a way thing has been done.

Employment professionals need to look at the way in which they hire and use wider international practices that may better suit themselves and their companies by reducing unneeded steps, better understanding job seekers by the content of the resumes and being aware of how bias can impact of selecting the best individual can have on a company's performance. More so as Thailand tries to internationalize its local market by allowing skilled foreign workers to be employed.

This study touches on several areas in which photographs impact hiring in Thailand but also shows there are more to the routine task. Organizational culture, personal habit, reading, looks bias,

questioning, and local procedures are some areas which can be improved by understanding the current process used.

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