Soft Power in a Pandemic World: a Story of Contagious Appeal: How did countries' Covid-19 response affect their attractiveness abroad?

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How did countries' Covid-19 response affect their attractiveness abroad?

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has altered how countries project and gain soft power. Within the context of this global crisis, most researchers followed the conventional trend to investigate soft power as a resource (i.e., health diplomacy). Yet, scant studies have approached soft power as an outcome. The present thesis fills this gap by examining how countries' (i.e., United States' and New Zealand's) Covid-19 response affected their attractiveness abroad (i.e., in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands). In order to address this inquiry, the theoretical lenses of rational and social attraction are amplified with socio-psychological literature on the Similarity-Attraction Theory. The theories are tested by means of minimalist process-tracing, combined with a cross-case analysis. The findings support the proposition that (in)competencies (demonstrated through the Covid-19 response) sparked rational attraction (or aversion) among foreign audiences. While support indicating the presence of social attraction (or aversion) is detected, it warrants a more cautious interpretation due to case-specific alternative explanations. The findings challenge the assumption that "likeness goes with liking", by underscoring how dissimilarities tied to success appeared to elicit attraction. Further research should investigate whether this effect is still present when the scope condition is not met.

Keywords: soft power, Covid-19, rational and social attraction, Similarity-Attraction Theory

"Having the biggest banks, having the biggest military has no meaning in this kind of germ warfare. The frontline is not soldiers; the frontline is doctors and nurses. The planes are grounded, the bombs are irrelevant. It turns out that pride precedes a fall."

— Jackson (as cited in Smith, 2020f)

Introduction

Change can be subtle. It can be intangible and beautiful. However, as the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic demonstrated, change can also be conspicuous, concrete and scary. As it spread around the globe, the virus caused a horrifying surge in human suffering, while prompting unprecedented national responses (Cotula, 2021, p. 1). Ever since, scholars from various disciplines sought to examine the impact of the pandemic (e.g., socio-economic (Auriemma & Iannaccone, 2020); (mental) health (Galea et al., 2020); behavioral, (Sauer et al., 2020)). While certainly instructive, these studies merely reveal the tip of the iceberg (Kaczorowski & Del Grande, 2021). In fact, there seems to be a broad consensus that the pandemic is "more than an unfortunate accident" (Žižek, 2020, p. 20), as many speculate how it will affect and perhaps even change the current world order.

In accordance with literature on the transformative potential of events (Van Dooremalen, 2021, p. 762), it is still premature to confirm Kissinger's prediction that "the coronavirus pandemic will forever alter the world order" (2020). Nonetheless, there is reason to believe that the outbreak could bear critical implications for (inter)national politics (Dunford & Qi, 2021; Gardini, 2020; Wang & Sun, 2020; Zhao, 2021), as certain manifestations, hinting at potential effects, are surfacing.

A striking example took place in Italy. Results from the Pollster SWG reveal that following China's *vaccine diplomacy*, 52% of the Italian citizens considered China to be a "friendly" country (in April 2020): a considerable 42% jump compared with 2019 (MacDonald, 2020). It appeared as if Europe's *medical nationalism* allowed China room to strengthen its soft power in Italy (Chen, 2021, p. 15; Dams et al., 2021, p. 56). While the durability of this effect is contested (Leigh, 2021; Patey, 2020), a growing body of research suggests that a country's Covid-19 response is affecting how it is perceived abroad (Brand Finance, 2021; Friedman, 2020; Snyder & Sindyukov, 2020). Nonetheless, little research has touched upon this relationship as it remains unsure what makes certain actions attractive to a foreign audience. The present study addresses this knowledge gap by investigating *how countries' Covid-19 response affected their attractiveness abroad.*

The contribution to the academic field is three-fold. First, the research adds to the global effort to 'make sense of the pandemic' (Campbell-Verduyn et al., 2020, p. 4). As argued by Barberia et al. (2021, p. 2051), the pandemic should be understood as a social phenomenon, making it an "avenue for research not only by virologists but also by [political] scientists". This research will address the broader call to deal with important gaps in our understanding of the dynamic effects of the Covid-19 outbreak (Cambridge Core, n.d.; Maggetti et al., 2021, p. 227; Oxford Academic, n.d.).

Second, the study contributes to the extensive amount of literature on soft power, which has largely examined soft power as a resource (Seong-Hun, 2018, p. 10). When addressing the pandemic, most studies explored how countries employed soft power tools in order to 'win hearts' abroad (e.g., Brown & Ladwig, 2020; Gill, 2020; Hagström, & Gustafsson, 2021; Hossain, 2021). Instead of this capabilities-centric mindset, a different perspective is adopted, consistent with the argument that power should be measured in terms of outcome (Hart, 1976; Patalakh, 2016, p. 99). By adopting the corresponding target-oriented approach (Pestsov & Bobylo, 2015a, p. 112), and interpreting soft power as *outcome-as-attitude* (Pestsov & Bobylo, 2015b, p. 43), the research answers Roselle's et al. (2014, p. 71) call to examine how certain actions affect attractiveness.

Third, this paper expands our current understanding of the sources of attraction. While cautiously touched upon within the field of International Relations (IR) (Lee, 2016, p. 808; Patalakh, 2018, p. 58), the mechanisms of attraction are mostly covered in socio-psychological literature. Therefore, two theories (i.e., rational and social attraction) proposed by Patalakh (2018), are tested and further amplified with insights borrowed from psychological research on the effect of similarity (Byrne, 1971, 1997; Sheafer et al., 2013; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In doing so, the conventional assumption that *likeness goes with liking* (Caprara et al., 2007, p. 609) is challenged.

Literature Review

Soft Power

The concept of power, described by some as "the most important single idea in political theory" (Lasswell & Kaplan, as cited in Baldwin, 2016, p. 1), remains among the least understood concepts in IR (Dhanapala, 2019, p. 36; Hayden, 2012, p. 35; Wojciuk et al., 2015, p. 300). Power is commonly defined as "A's ability to get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (Dahl, 1957, pp. 202-203) and consists of a considerable amount of typologies and forms (for an overview, see Baldwin, 2016). One of these forms is the notion of soft power (or, the

power of attraction), which has been added to the list by Nye (1990). In the remainder of the paper, soft power means "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies" (Nye, 2004, p. x). This concept quickly became a central analytic term in foreign policy discussions and the public discourse (Koopman, 2014, p. 8; Wilson, 2008, p. 114). Simultaneously, soft power remains a topic of critical scrutiny (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018, p. 1141; Feklyunina, 2016, p. 771; Kaldor, 2014, p. 374). Nonetheless, the wider shared agreement seems to be that political power does not always stem from the "barrel of a gun", as numerous scholars have built upon the concept (e.g., Goldsmith & Horiuchi, 2012, p. 555; Pate, 2018, p. 323; Warren, 2014, p. 116).

Soft Power as a Resource

Even though soft power was first introduced by Nye (1990) in a specific historical (end of the Cold War), geographical (US), and political context (ideas of decline) (Angey-Sentuc & Molho, 2016, p. 6), it is increasingly tested in different settings and political sub-disciplines. Tellis et al. (2001, p. 13) identify three approaches to the notion of (soft) power: power as "resources", "strategies", or "outcome" (for a similar argument, see Pestsov & Bobylo, 2015a). The vast majority of the literature on soft power explored the concept in terms of resources.

For instance, researchers have been testing the "utility" of soft power as a resource by examining the concept in different cases (e.g., *Qatar* (al-Horr et al., 2019); *Turkey* (Yılmaz, 2018); *China* (Rahman, 2019); *the European Union* (Nielsen & Vilson, 2014); *Russia* (Bukh, 2016)). The proposed soft power tools are quite diverse. For example, Leibrandt-Loxton (2020) investigates how bilateral parliamentary diplomacy operates as a means of attraction, while others focus on education as a source of soft power (e.g., Bislev, 2017; Wojciuk et al., 2015). By underscoring the interpretation of soft power as a resource, the main aim is to identify what asset is (or can be) used to make a country more attractive in order to achieve a specific goal (e.g., Aras & Mohammed, 2019; Baldinetti, 2018; Kos-Stanišić & Car, 2021; Solomon, 2014; Yellinek et al., 2020).

This resource-oriented approach to soft power is also present within the topic of interest, which is the relationship between the pandemic and the attractiveness of countries (Doyle, 2020, p. 480). The literature on Covid-19 and soft power can be roughly divided into two strands: research addressing the broader implications of the pandemic on (soft) power relations (e.g., Attias, 2020; Cull, 2021; Gill, 2020; Stromseth, 2021, p. 9), and research investigating soft-power tools within the context of the crisis. Regarding the latter, it is primarily China and

its use of "health diplomacy" as a tool that has received academic attention (e.g., Chen, 2021; Hossain, 2021; Kurecic & Haluga, 2021; Raman & Mukherjee, 2021; Qi et al., 2021). Some sought to emphasize the limitations (Qi et al., 2021), while others focused on the success of this strategy (Chen, 2021). What they have in common is the traditional understanding of (soft) power as an instrument. While Von Feigenblatt Rojas (2021, p. 12) notes that "China has lost a considerable amount of soft power as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic", thereby hinting that soft power is approached as an outcome, the researcher fails to properly analyze why this is the case.

Thus, what seems to be rather neglected in IR research are the specific conditions that allow a state to yield soft power from a foreign audience (Mattern, 2005, p. 583; Roselle et al., 2014, p. 71; Szostek, 2017, p. 379). Almost every definition of soft power recognizes attraction as its core component (Pate, 2018, p. 321), yet few studies have actually examined how specific power resources (or agent characteristics) are translated into attraction (Hall, 2010, p. 207; Hayden, 2012, p. 43; Klyueva, 2017, p. 79; Patalakh, 2018, p. 58). Therefore, the present study takes an outcome-driven approach, while responding to Mattern's (2005, p. 584) call to investigate *what it is that makes a country attractive in the first place*.

Sources of Attraction: Success & Similarity

Outcome-as-Attitude

Soft power as an outcome can be further specified as either *outcome-as-attitude* or *outcome-as-behavior* (Pestsov & Bobylo, 2015b, p. 43). Whereas the former merely illustrates the attitudes of foreign audiences, the latter focuses on how these attitudes are translated into desired behavior (Bakalov, 2019, p. 142). Acknowledging the constraint that the concept only depicts "a potential for the achievement of a desired outcome" (Bakalov, 2019, p. 142), the study is limited to soft power as *outcome-as-attitude*, as it properly fits the research goal. Furthermore, because there is reason to believe that the target's perception actually determines whether agent characteristics produce soft power (Baldwin, 2016, p. 169; Nye, 2011, p. 92; Solomon, 2014, p. 723), the research applies a target-centered perspective on attraction (Patalakh, 2018, p. 58; Tokdemir, 2017, p. 6).

Forces of Attraction

In order to determine how countries' Covid-19 response affected their attractiveness abroad, this study builds upon Patalakh's (2018, p. V) proposition that soft power can be produced through *emotional, rational* and/or *social attraction*. Within the present study emotional

attraction is treated as the scope condition, while rational and social attraction are the causal mechanism of interest. In the subsequent section, the theories are discussed, amplified with (socio-psychological) literature, and embedded within the context of the pandemic.

Emotional Attraction: the Scope Condition

Kearn (2011, pp. 71-72) argues how discussions on soft power commonly assume a similar social setting, posing a potential limitation on the scope and applicability of the concept. This scope condition seems closely related to emotional attraction, which "rests on B's [target] sense of identification with A [actor]" (French & Raven, as cited in Patalakh, 2018, p. 75). The proposition that attraction finds it roots in similarity and social identification, is supported by literature on the *Values-based Proximity Theory* (Sheafer et al., 2013), the *Social Identity Theory* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and the *Similarity-Attraction Theory* (Byrne, 1971, 1997). As such, emotional attraction, based on in-group similarities, could serve as the foundation in which social or rational attraction (or aversion) are embedded. For instance, the *Value-based Proximity Theory* suggests that mutual media visibility tends to be greater among like-minded countries (Sheafer et al., 2013, p. 1259). Furthermore, it is argued that deviations from rules are more likely to be detected within systems where norms of appropriate behavior have already been established (Kearn, 2011, p. 71).

However, there is reason to believe that the assumption that attraction strengthens when similarities are discovered, and aversion occurs when dissimilarities increase (Wells & Aicher, 2013, p. 4), is not always met. In particular, one might wonder what happens when the differences are associated with something desirable.

Rational Attraction

Rational attraction "varies with the extent of the knowledge or perception that B ascribes to A within a certain sphere" (French & Raven, as cited in Patalakh, 2018, p. 84). In this case, attraction is generated through B's perception of A's competence and success, which subsequently commands admiration and emulation (Li, 2009, p. 7; Nye, 2011, p. 92; Vuving, 2009, p. 8).

This form of attraction seems particularly relevant within the context of the pandemic, as it is consistent with the broader believe that a country's response to a sudden event affects how it is perceived by the international community (Bruno, 2020; Cevik, 2019, p. 65; Lotten, 2021; Matteucci, 2005). During a crisis, countries are able to demonstrate *protean* power, which is based upon their creativity and agility in response to uncertainty (Katzenstein & Seybert,

2018, p. 4) (for a similar argument, see Friedman, 2020). When countries pursue similar objectives (i.e., combat the pandemic), but the target state's approach proves ineffective, the more successful agent could be leading by example (Kearn, 2011, p. 69). As such, rational attraction is associated with the aspiration to emulate other countries' policies (i.e., Covid-19 response) (Patalakh, 2018, p. 85).

Because rational attraction stems from A being more competent than B, the source of attraction involves some form of dissimilarity. Indeed, while challenging the *Similarity-Attraction Theory*, Mitteness et al. (2014, p. 628) underscore how actors engage with dissimilar others "due to a strong desire to receive information and cognitive benefits". Rather than sheer similarity, it would be a country's success that appeals to a foreign audience.

Social Attraction

Social attraction "has its origin in B's internalised values" (French & Raven, as cited in Patalakh, 2018, p. 88). Here, attraction is determined by resonance through shared ideals, values, causes, or visions (Vuving, 2009, p. 11). The either positive or negative assessment of the agent stems from the norms and values that the target considers important to adhere to (Patalakh, 2018, p. 88; Vuving, 2009, p. 11). This mechanism is sensitive to context, insofar as the set of values varies depending on both the diversity within the target audience as well as the environmental setting (Kearn, 2011, p. 78; Keating & Kaczmarska, 2017, p. 4).

In order for social attraction to arise, the values associated with a Covid-19 response would need to resonate with the intended audience (Klyueva, 2017, p. 80). Such values could be manifested in both a country's domestic and international policies (or measures), as well as their discursive context (Boin et al. 2021, p. 71; Hall, 2010, p. 192; Hayden, 2012; Mattern, 2005, p. 588). Furthermore, Vuving (2009, p. 11) interestingly argues that a stronger form of "beauty" (or social attraction) comes from a country that acts as the "avatar of an ideal". As such, countries that excel in a desirable value, could gain more social attraction.

Building upon the *Similarity-Attraction Theory*, this form of appeal seems to function as one would expect: when countries act in harmony with certain values (similar), attraction is produced, whereas acting against those values (dissimilar), fosters the opposite effect.

Research Design

The two causal mechanisms (rational and social attraction) are tested by means of minimalist process-tracing (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p. 246) and a cross-case analysis (Khan &

VanWynsberghe, 2008). In the following paragraph the case selection, methods of data selection, and methods of analysis are discussed.

Case Selection: Agent

In attempting to grasp how countries' Covid-19 response affected their attractiveness abroad, a variance-based conceptualization of the dependent variable (i.e., Y is *change in attractiveness*) seems appropriate. Therefore, two diverse cases, that represent the full range of values that characterize this change between 2020 and 2021, are selected (Seawright & Gerring, 2008, p. 300).

Soft power as *outcome-as-attitude* is best measured through public opinion surveys (Goldsmith & Horiuchi, 2012, p. 555; Hooghe, 2010, p. 13; Pestsov & Bobylo, 2015b, pp. 45-46). Subsequently, the cases are drawn from the Soft Power Index (Brand Finance, 2020, 2021), which adopts a similar conceptualization of the key concept and is based on respondents' "perception of soft power" (Brand Finance, 2020, pp. 9-10). In doing so, it accurately captures the global perspective of a country's attractiveness. The case selection consisted of several steps.

First, from the 105 countries listed in the Global Soft Power Index (2021), only 60 were picked. This decision was made because the others were not included in the Index published in 2020, thus making it impossible to measure their change in attractiveness. Second, while an 'index score change' (revealing the difference in attractiveness between 2020 and 2021) is provided, this score is partly based on the additional indicator "Covid-19 response", which was not present in the Index of 2020. To ensure that this 'index score change' does not only capture change due to the inclusion of the new indicator, a new 'index score change.1' was manually calculated for each country, by pretending the Covid-19 indicator did not exist. Then, this new 'index score change.1' was weighted against the 'index score change' proposed by Brand Finance (2021), in order to not totally disregard, but slightly nuance their score. The mean of the two (i.e., 'index score change.2') is presented for the 60 countries in Appendix A (Figure 1).

The two countries with the highest and lowest scores are the United States (US) (-6.5) and New Zealand (NZ) (+4.2). Table 1 presents their change across ten indicators, suggesting that it is indeed not only the inclusion of the "Covid-19 response" indicator that drives their change in attractiveness. Because the countries represent two extreme values, they are expected to be informative and to some extent representative for the global trend (Seawright & Gerring,

2008, p. 297; Swanborn, 2010, p. 14; Yang & Loog, 2018, p. 359). Furthermore, both cases fit within the scope condition, as is discussed below.

Table 1

Change in soft power perception on 10 indicators

	New-Zealand									
	F	**R**	**I**	**B**	**G**	**IR**	**C**	**M**	**E**	**P**
2020	5,9	7,0	3,5	4,6	4,7	3,3	4,5	3,5	3,3	4,9
2021	6,0	7,0	3,8	5,1	5,1	4,3	4,0	4,0	3,6	4,8
change	**0,1**	**0**	**0,3**	**0,5**	**0,4**	**1**	**0,5**	**0,5**	**0,3**	**0,1**

	United States									
	F	**R**	**I**	**B**	**G**	**IR**	**C**	**M**	**E**	**P**
2020	8,6	7,1	7,7	6,6	4,3	6,2	5,5	5,2	6,6	3,9
2021	8,5	6,6	7,2	6,5	3,8	6,2	5,3	5,1	7,0	3,6
change	**0,1**	**0,5**	**0,5**	**0,1**	**0,5**	**0**	**0,2**	**0,1**	**0,4**	**0,3**

Note. Adapted from Global Soft Power Index (2020 and 2021) by Brand Finance. source: © and database right Brand Finance Plc. All rights reserved.

Case Selection: Target

The Soft Power Index (Brand Finance, 2021) does not specify whether or how this "perception of soft power" varies between target states. This means that while a global trend is illustrated, it remains unclear to what extent it applies to specific countries. Acknowledging this limitation, two cases are selected. The United Kingdom (UK) is selected as the typical case on the scope condition (Beach & Pedersen, 2018, p. 850). The second case, the Netherlands (NL), is selected in order to complement and add nuance to the study by slightly relaxing the scope condition. This selection, driven by both methodological as well as theoretical concern, asks for further elaboration.

First, there is reason to believe that the trend presented in the Index can also be observed in the UK and to some extent in the NL. Data provided by the Pew Research Center (Wike et al., 2021) reveals that in 2020, only 41% in the UK (compared to 57% in 2019), and 30% in the NL (compared to 46% in 2019), had a favorable view of the US. While no similar survey

indicating NZ's attractiveness is available, the YouGov-rating shows that NZ was UK's "favorite" country in 2020 (Smith, 2020). Unfortunately, no evidence supporting the same effect is found for NL, making its selection partially intuitive.

Furthermore, the UK, the US, and NZ belong to the same "Anglosphere" in-group (Bennett, 2002, p. 2002), consisting of western states united by linguistics, values, and other markers of identity "associated with the historical experience of England" (Vucetic, 2010, p. 455). Because this identification hints at the presence of emotional attraction (Patalakh, 2008, p. 75), the three countries fit within the scope condition. While the NL does not belong to the same Anglosphere in-group, and is therefore unlikely to share the same amount of identification, the country is a member of the broader "western world" (Bonilla-Silva, 2000, p. 205; Obinger & Schmitt, 2020, p. 271). As such, by adding the NL to the analysis, the scope condition is slightly relaxed.

Methods of Data-Selection

In order to analyze the public attitude of the UK and the NL vis-à-vis the agents' Covid-19 response, data is drawn from 1) *parliamentary debates* and 2) *the media landscape*, which both function as an "actor, arena and archive" (Baur & Lahusen, 2005, p. 1) of public discourse. The data is identified and collected in the period from January 1st until December 31st (2020), as it fits within the time frame used by the Global Soft Power Index (Brand Finance, 2021).

1) Parliamentary debates. Parliamentary debates transcripts are used to analyze the target's attitude toward the agent's Covid-19 response, while simultaneously casting the net widely for alternative explanations. Therefore, debates including the terms "United States" (N=739) and "New Zealand" (N=252) are selected by using the search bar provided on *Hansard UK Parliament* for the UK. For the NL, all the transcripts including the terms "Verenigde Staten" (N=863) and "Nieuw Zeeland" (N=242) are selected from the archives of the *Tweede Kamer.*

2) Media landscape. Articles covering specifically the agents' Covid-19 response are selected from *the Guardian* (for the UK) and *de Volkskrant* (for the NL) by using the search bar. Both are considered to be left-wing quality papers (Euro topics, n.d.; Simons, 2020, p. 46) and are among the most read online news outlets in their respective countries (GNM press office, 2020; Pettit, 2022). For *the Guardian,* articles including the searchterms "United States + Covid" (N=2759) are selected. Since this combination did not work for NZ due to unclear reasons, articles that mentioned "New Zealand" were filtered and manually selected when they mentioned the pandemic (N=559). For *de Volkskrant*, articles including the terms "Verenigde

Staten + Covid" (N=345) (for the US), and "Nieuw Zeeland + Covid" (N=63) (for NZ) are selected.

Methods of Data-Analysis

By means of minimalist theory-testing process-tracing the study investigates whether there is any diagnostic evidence (Bennett & Checkel, 2014, p. 7) indicating the presence of either rational or social attraction (or aversion) (Beach & Pederson, 2019, p. 246). The evidence is collected through content and discourse analyses, seeking to confirm the operationalized proposition associated with the causal mechanisms. Through the help of a coding scheme, the analysis involved a search for themes that "emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon" (Simons, 2020, p. 47) or hint at the presence of the hypothesized empirical fingerprints described below (Beach & Pederson, 2019, p. 155).

Rational Attraction

Multiple pieces of "diagnostic evidence" (Bennett & Checkel, 2014) could indicate whether a country's Covid-19 response sparked rational attraction or aversion abroad. A cluster of three independent, yet mutually reinforcing predictions is proposed. While it is necessary to confirm at least one of them, it is not necessary to detect them all.

First, if rational attraction exists, it could leave fingerprints indicating 1.a. *admiration* (NZ) or 1.b. *condemnation* (US) for a country's Covid-19 response. Evidence hinting at perceived competence (Patalakh, 2018, p. 84) includes remarks regarding the country's strategy and/or its (un)successful outcome. While the first is expected to be case-specific and will be analyzed inductively, success or failure metrics usually include "raw statistics" (i.e., number of deaths or cases) (e.g., Roy, 2020; Zaki & Wayenberg, 2020, p. 19) or "soft statistics" (i.e., going back to normal). Both depict a country's *protean* power, which could add to perceived competence (Katzenstein & Seybert, 2018). Therefore, when a country's Covid-19 response (strategy and/or outcome) is met with either praise or criticism, it serves as evidence hinting at the presence of rational attraction.

Second, rational attraction could be articulated through *comparison*, when it is acknowledged that the agent is 2.a. *outperforming* (NZ) or 2.b. *underperforming* (US) the target state (or a broader population). Here certain (dis)similarities between the target and the agent are recognized. Kearn (2011, p. 69) argues that rational attraction increases when countries are pursuing similar objectives (i.e., fighting the pandemic), but the target state's approach is ineffective. Therefore, one could expect that in the case of NZ it is underscored

that the country is performing better (Kearn, 2011, p. 69). Fingerprints indicating this effect include statements along the lines of "while agent X enjoys Y number of cases, we have Z". The opposite for the US, where it could be underscored that "at least we are not doing as bad as agent X". The comparison is expected to be based upon the same indicators detected in the first fingerprint (i.e., indicators associated with competency and success).

Third, if rational attraction is based upon the aspiration to learn from the agent's experience (Patalakh, 2018, p. 85), the agent Covid-19 response could be either treated as 3.a. *an example of what to do* (NZ) or 3.b. *an example of what not to do* (US). Illustrations supporting this effect could include references to the agent serving as an exemplar. Such arguments could go along the lines of "because agent X did Y, and is now enjoying Z, we should also do Y". The opposite should be happening in the US, where the country is either not mentioned as an example at all, or is used as an adverse example of "what happens if we do not do Y".

Social Attraction

Again, three mutually reinforcing, yet independent fingerprints could indicate whether a country's Covid-19 response sparked social attraction or aversion abroad. While it is necessary to confirm at least one of them, it is not necessary to detect them all.

First, if a country's response affects social attraction by acting along or against shared values, fingerprints indicating 4.a. *appreciation* (NZ) or 4.b. *condemnation* (US) regarding the agent's behavior should be detected. When a country acts against the norms of appropriate behavior, this should be illuminated and evaluated accordingly. Given contextual insights, this appreciation or condemnation is expected to be focused upon how Covid-19 relates to democratic standards (e.g., Edgell et al., 2021, p.1). Nevertheless, given the mechanism's sensitivity to context (Keating & Kaczmarska, 2017, p. 4), arguments regarding potential breaches are expected to be more case-specific and will be explored in an inductive manner.

Second, even if the agent is not actively challenging a value, its Covid-19 response could mirror certain values found unattractive in the target state's audience. Here, the same theme of 5.a. *appreciation* (NZ) and 5.b. *condemnation* (US) is focused upon values behind specific policy choices. For instance, Coelho et al. (2021, p. 1) found that left-leaning citizens tended to prioritize health over economic concerns in the broader contextual debate regarding the disease or the cure. Again, other indicators constituting this fingerprint will be explored in an inductive manner due to reasons covered earlier.

Third, if a stronger form of social attraction (and perhaps aversion) is elicited when a country "champions a cause" (Vuving, 2009, p. 11), the agent's Covid-19 response and/or leadership could be treated as 6.a. *the avatar of an ideal* (NZ) or 6.b. *the avatar of an unideal* (US). Given the context-specific debate on the desirability of "female leadership" (e.g., UN Woman, 2020, p. 6; Windsor et al., 2020), evidence pointing out the "desirable values" behind Ardern's leadership style is expected.

Equifinality & Alternative Explanations

Recognizing the dictates of *equifinality* (Bennet & Checkel, 2015, p. 19), it lies beyond the scope of the study to propose a single comprehensive solution as to why the outcome of interest occurred. However, in order to answer Bennet and Checkel's (2015, p. 18) call to cast the net widely for alternative explanations, the research includes an inductive analysis of the parliamentary debates. By probing for the presence of alternative explanations, such as anti-Americanism (Katzenstein & Keohane, 2011) or the Trump-effect (Minkus et al., 2019), nuance is added to the findings.

Results

Rational Attraction

The following section is devoted to the mechanistic evidence supporting the presence of rational attraction or aversion. Since few discrepancies were identified between the UK and the NL, their findings are covered interchangeably. Differences that did occur are explicitly mentioned. The implications of the findings are addressed in the discussion.

New Zealand

As hypothesized (1.a.), *admiration* was expressed by stressing the competency and success of NZ's Covid-19 response, with regard to both policies and leadership. The strategy is predominantly praised for its *early* (e.g., Bossema, 2020; Graham-McLay, 2020f) and *swift* (e.g., Graham-McLay, 2020e; *Hansard*, November 2, 2020 col 113) execution. The assessment of this approach is remarkably often associated with Ardern's leadership, claiming that it "would not have been possible without her" (Phillips et al., 2020) (for similar arguments, see Baker & Wilson, 2020; Edwards 2020b). Her leadership is described as *brilliant* (e.g., *Hansard,* 18 June 2020 col 269) and *decisive* (e.g., Edwards, 2020a; Roy, 2020d). Furthermore, Ardern is credited for *clear* (e.g., Drayer, 2020) and *unifying* (e.g., Graham-McLay, 2020g) communication.

However, it is less the manifestation of the Covid-19 response, and more its successful outcome, that generated admiration from both the UK and the NL. Often when NZ's strategy is described, its success is accentuated (e.g., Alcorn, 2020; Badham, 2020b; Blakely et al., 2020; Doherty, 2020; Graham-McLay, 2020d; Visser, 2020a). For instance, Pam (2020) argues that the country found the "perfect cocktail of science, strictness and didactic talent" which resulted in "a minimal number of deaths" (own translation). Even though the country suffered from some surges, terms like *less than* (e.g., Roy, 2020e), *just* (e.g., Graham-McLay, 2020c), or *only* (e.g., Rourke, 2020) are used when referring to the country's "raw statistics". Furthermore, the fact that "normality – or some brand of it – was returning to New Zealand" (Ma'ia'i, 2020), is positively covered (e.g., Graham-McLay, 2020h; *Hansard*, 19 October 2020 col 795; *Kamerstukken II* 2019/20, 2020D38777, p. 8). Thus, evidence hinting at the presence of *admiration* is detected.

Observables indicating rational attraction through *comparison* are encountered mainly in the UK, perhaps due to the fact that both countries are more comparable by virtue of emotional appeal. Only twice is it articulated in NL that NZ performs better (2.a.) (i.e., *Kamerstukken II* 2019/20, 25 295, nr. 348, p. 11). It is stressed several times that NZ exhibits certain competencies (2.a.) which the UK does not possess. For instance, it is argued "that the immediacy — the urgency — that has been lacking in this country was evidenced in countries such as Australia and New Zealand" (*Hansard*, 2 November 2020 col 113) (for similar arguments, see *Hansard*, 19 March 2020 col 1139; *Hansard,* 29 April 2020 col 317). UK's measures are described as "nowhere near as comprehensive" as the "strict quarantine policies" (Graham-Harrison, 2020) undertaken by NZ, further illuminating the country's competency.

Furthermore, it is underscored how NZ is enjoying "many freedoms and liberties at a time when cases in Europe and the US are soaring" (Roy, 2020c) (for similar arguments, see Henriques-Gomes, 2020a; Taylor, 2020). This comparison fuels not only a sense of desire and envy (Graham-McLay, 2020b), but also a sense of shame. For instance, it is argued that "as we face another wave of unnecessary deaths here, life is returning to normal [in NZ], so is the Secretary of State embarrassed that other countries have managed to drive down cases while his Government are failing?" (*Hansard,* 19 October 2020 col 795).

This evidence indicating rational appeal through comparison, contained an interesting emphasis on both NZ's *uniqueness* as well as *similarity*. It is repeatedly stressed how the Covid-19 response is *strict* (e.g., Graham-McLay, 2020a; Roy, 2020a; Visser, 2020a), *stricter* than the response of other countries (e.g., Visser, 2020b), and *draconian* (e.g., De Jager, 2020; Rihgton,

2020a). This unique response seemed to grant the country some form of exceptionality, as it "is now part of a small group of [Covid-free] countries" (Graham-McLay, 2020e) (for similar arguments, see *Hansard,* 5 October 2020 col 643; Robinson, 2020).

On the other hand, similarities are accentuated by positioning the country within the western in-group (e.g., De Jager, 2020; Edwards, 2020a; Roy, 2020b). By arguing that NZ was among the "few western nations" that employed a strict elimination strategy (Doherty, 2020) (e.g., "almost unique among Anglophone countries" (Roy & Doherty, 2020)), and then emphasizing how well the country performed, both similarities as well as distinctions are highlighted.

NZ's Covid-19 response is often cited as an *exemplar* (3.a.) (e.g., *Hansard,* 14 October 2020 col 404; *Hansard*, 29 June 2020 col 59; *Kamerstukken II* 2019/20, 2020D15355, p. 8). Referring to the country's success, it is declared that a "lockdown can work if managed properly … We need to learn lessons from Australia and New Zealand which have, on the whole, managed it well" (Letters, 2020). In this case, arguments along the lines of "we need to look at" (e.g., *Hansard*, 28 September 2020 col 23; *Kamerstukken II* 2019/20, 2021D00196, nr. 35526, p. 36), or "we should follow the example of" (e.g., *Hansard,* 12 December 2020 col 204), indicate the desire to emulate the country. For instance, it is argued that

> Many small independent countries are also making a much better fist of dealing with the coronavirus crisis than the UK is … Look at how well New Zealand has managed the crisis, and how well it has been able to come out of it, under the brilliant leadership of Jacinda Ardern. We have a lot to learn from other countries about how to do things better in so many ways. (*Hansard,* 18 June 2020 col 269)

In parliamentary debates the main interest lies with concrete policy examples (e.g., social distancing measures (*Hansard*, 23 March 2020 col 54) or diary keeping (*Hansard*, 22 June 2020 col 19; *Kamerstukken II* 2019/20, 25 295, nr. 314, p. 13)). Conversely, in the media landscape, an interesting emphasis is placed on Arden's exemplary leadership style. Particularly in *de Volkskrant*, it is asserted that Arden is a leader "we all wish for in this crisis" (Knols, 2020, own translation), arguing that the minister De Jong "is eager to become the Dutch Ardern" (Wagendorp, 2020, own translation) (for a similar argument, see *Kamerstukken II* 2019/20, 2021D00234, nr. 14-8, p. 10). These arguments overlap with social attraction (6.a.),

as Ardern became the "international face" of the women who mastered the pandemic "exceptionally well" (Curtin, 2020). The Prime Minister is repeatedly referred to as an example of the benefits of female leadership (e.g., Drayer, 2020; Henley & Roy, 2020; Laterveer, 2020a; Laterveer, 2020b; Tromp, 2020). As such, certain principles underpinning Ardern's leadership (6.a.), coupled with the country's success (1.a.), prompted discussion regarding the desirability of imitation (3.a.). As argued by Dembroff (2020): "We find ourselves in a time that calls for traditionally 'feminine' traits, such as empathy, solidarity and compassion".

United States

Empirical fingerprints hinting at *condemnation* (1.b.) were discovered, as it is underscored that US' Covid-19 response is *chaotic* (e.g., Beaumont, 2020; *Hansard,* 14 December 2020 col 30) *slow* (e.g., Persson, 2020a; Pilkington, 2020a), and *late* (e.g., Kraak, 2020; Redactie, 2020a). The country's "failed" response (Geall, 2020) is linked to president Trump, who was unable "to show competent, rational leadership" (Tisdall, 2020a) (for similar arguments, see Milman, 2020a; Persson, 2020b; Wolffe, 2020). In contrast to Ardern, Trump is accused of mixed-messaging (e.g., Glenza, 2020a; Lutz & Pengelly, 2020; Smith, 2020b; Vos, 2020), and polarization (e.g., Levin, 2020a; McCarthy, 2020a; Smith, 2020a). The "erratic nature of the American response" is evaluated as "shocking and frightening" (Editorial, 2020a). As argued by Pilkington (2020b), "good policy and strong leadership can beat the virus. The US had neither".

This "catastrophic mishandling" of the crisis (Reich, 2020) is captured in the country's aftermath. In contrast to NZ, the "raw statistics" are referred to in terms like *at least* (e.g., Beaumont & Oltermann, 2020; Farrer, 2020) or *more than* (e.g., Badham, 2020a; Holpuch, 2020b; Milman, 2020b; Van Hal & Keulemans, 2020). In addition, there appears to be little, if any, indication that the country is returning back to normality (e.g., Aratani & Glenza, 2020; Guardian staff, 2020; McCarthy, 2020b). Multiple times it is underscored that "the most dangerous phase of the US Covid-19 crisis may be yet to come" (Eichengreen, 2020).

Consequently, no fingerprints indicate admiration regarding the country's Covid-19 response. Quite the contrary, the unsuccessful strategy was met with condemnation.

Some observables indicating rational aversion through comparison (2.b.) are detected in both the UK and the NL. However, it is only scarcely mentioned that the US is underperforming. The greatest emphasis laid on the country's *distinctiveness* and *similarity*.

First, it is argued that the US ranked among the "worst-hit of developed nations" (Oliver, 2020), due to the country's fast and high rising numbers (e.g., *Kamerstukken II* 2019/20, 25 295, nr. 247, p. 21; Sullivan, 2020; Walters & Bekiempis, 2020; Watts, 2020). Furthermore, it is asserted that the US is underperforming (2.b.) compared to the EU (e.g., Glenza, 2020b; Milman & Adolphe, 2020). As Redactie (2020b) contends: "While the number of new infections in the U.S. and Latin America remain alarmingly high, Europe is slowly reopening" (own translation). By arguing that a "country that prides itself on its exceptionalism can now without ambiguity claim that title for its experience of the virus" (Pilkington, 2020c), US' *distinctiveness* as a "pariah nation" (Prose, 2020a) is underscored.

Moreover, certain resemblances between Trump and Johnson are criticized in *the Guardian* (e.g., Noor, 2020), by claiming that "if Boris Johnson is mishandling the pandemic, he is not alone" (Tisdall, 2020b). Indeed, similar behavioral patterns, like for example trivializing the pandemic (e.g., Borger et al., 2020; Levin, 2020b), are associated with both leaders' right-wing orientation (Jarral, 2020). As argued by Malik (2020):

> The similarities are striking, the conclusions unavoidable. Here in the UK, we comforted ourselves with the belief that while our own buffoonish rightwing leader had his faults, at least he was no Donald Trump. But in the end, Boris Johnson has managed to stumble over even this lowest of hurdles. The UK government's response to the crisis has turned out to be nearly as flippant and ill-prepared as the US's.

Subsequently, the fact that both countries share the "highest Covid-19 casualties" is blamed on their like-minded government (Cohen, 2020). By arguing that "being governed by Anglo-Saxon conservatives is a threat to the health of nations" (Cohen, 2020), and that the two countries are "bound together not just by a 'special relationship' but by a worrying inadequacy in government response" (Bell, 2020), it becomes evident how similarities were found repulsive, rather than attractive. Evidence hinting at a similar trend in the NL is hardly observed (e.g., Koopman, 2020).

As expected, rather than leading by example, the US "showed itself to be anything but a model for the rest of the world to emulate" (3.b.) (Borger, 2020a). Of course, because target states believe they are performing equally bad if not better, there is little reason to emulate US' Covid-19 response. When it is suggested that lessons should be learned from the US, the arguments

are framed in terms of *what not to do* (e.g., *Hansard,* 10 September 2020 col 925). Particularly in the NL, adverse examples are cited concerning the potentially devastating impact of the pandemic if the government fails to act (e.g., *Kamerstukken II* 2019/20, 2020D16214, nr. 2616, p. 4; *Kamerstukken II* 2019/20, 2020D1980, p. 12). In addition, Trump did not exactly function as a role model either. Arguing that there are three types of leaders in the world, type one is described as "denying and ignoring, with the disastrous culmination of President Trump" (*Kamerstukken II* 2019/20, 2021D00234, nr. 14-8, p. 10, own translation). Even more, it is argued that "Donald Trump's performance is a lesson in how not to handle an emergency", adding that "it may become a compulsory case study for future students of crisis management" (Tisdall, 2020b).

An interesting observation is the tendency to portray US' and NZ's response as two polar opposites. For instance, the Dutch cabinet is asked to choose an ultimatum: either eliminate the virus as NZ did, or "muddle through" as the US (*Kamerstukken II* 2019/20, 2020D23721, nr. 73-6, p. 16, own translation) (for a similar argument, see *Kamerstukken II* 2019/20, 2021D00234, nr. 14-8, p. 10). Furthermore, whereas Ardern became the "international face" of successful leadership, Trump became the example of the opposite, as it was argued that "we need leaders who allow public health experts, rather than their political self-interest, to guide policy" (Dembroff, 2020).

Overall, the propositions associated with rational attraction (NZ) and aversion (US) are supported with empirical evidence. The emphasis on both countries' uniqueness was especially interesting, as well as the tendency to illuminate certain (dis)similarities.

Social Attraction

In the following section, the mechanistic evidence indicating the presence of either social attraction or aversion, is presented per country. If discrepancies were identified between the UK and the NL, these are mentioned throughout. Because the findings seem somewhat case-specific, they demand a cautious interpretation (see alternative explanations).

New Zealand

Evidence supporting the proposition that NZ *acting according to values* (4.a.) might have added to social appeal, is somewhat inconclusive. To be sure, the country was praised for the implementation of the Epidemic Response Committee (chaired by the opposition leader), which arguably enhanced democratic scrutiny (*Hansard*, 2 November 2020 col 71; *Hansard*, 28

September 2020 col 43; Proctor, 2020). In addition, it was believed that NZ successfully bridged the tension between "individual liberties" and "success" (Osterhaus, 2020): citing NZ as an example of a like-minded country, it is argued that it would be "Western arrogance" not to learn from Asian countries:

> In commentaries you constantly read that such measures are unacceptable in an open democracy. Draconian measures belong in an authoritarian state like China, it then sounds pitiful. But Taiwan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand use the same approach. Are they not democracies anymore? (De Jager, 2020, own translation)

In other words, the country is not only playing according to the rules, but is simultaneously providing an example of how to do it. However, little to no further comments are made regarding the country's behavior toward other values or interests. This is remarkable, since NZ, for example, did act "selflessly" by allowing other countries to get the vaccines first (Staff and agencies, 2020). Furthermore, while addressed only once, the possibly adverse consequences of NZ's Covid-19 measures on democracy are disputed (e.g., Edwards, 2020c).

There is some indication of a favorable assessment regarding the values underlying the country's Covid-19 response to the economic outfall of the crisis (5.a.), which put a strong emphasis on the protection of jobs (e.g., *Hansard*, 17 March 2020 col 969; *Hansard*, 17 September 2020 col 551). The appeal of this approach, pitted against neoliberalism, is stressed by arguing that NZ "would no longer let growth and productivity alone guide fiscal policy, but also softer measures such as the well-being of the population, the sense of belonging, and trust in politics" (Knols, 2020, own translation). Nevertheless, few further mentions are made regarding attractive values behind the country's Covid-19 response. For instance, Ardern's "insistence on saving lives" (choosing the cure over the disease) is not often praised (Henley & Roy, 2020).

The majority of the empirical fingerprints pointing to the presence of social attraction are concentrated around Ardern, who served as the "international" face (or, avatar) of successful (female) leadership during the crisis (6.a.). While features such as "decisiveness" are likely to exert rational appeal, Ardern is also commended for acting upon *softer* values, by "combining decisiveness with vision and humanity" (Van de Griend, 2020, own translation). For instance,

it is argued that "her insistence on saving lives and her kindness-first approach – urging New Zealanders to look after their neighbors, take care of the vulnerable, and make sacrifices for the greater good – has won her many fans" (Henley & Roy, 2020). Tromp (2020) praised Ardern's wish to "reassure children by promising that the Easter Bunny and tooth fairy are also among the vital professions", while arguing that "female perspective is lacking" in crisis management. Further empirical evidence includes admiration regarding other values reflected through her leadership, such as *kindness* (e.g., Edwards, 2020d) and *empathy* (e.g., The Observer, 2020). Combining these insights with the findings in 3.a., it appears likely that NZ's response served as an exemplar not only due to its success, but also due to its alignment with specific values articulated through Ardern's leadership.

United States

Several empirical manifestations suggest how US' Covid-19 response might have led to social aversion, by acting *against values* (3.b.). First, the president is questioned for behaving in an *authoritarian* (e.g., *Hansard,* 18 April 2020 col 936; Korteweg, 2020a) or *plutocratic* (e.g., Tisdall, 2020c) manner. An example portraying such "far-reaching use of executive power" (Smith, 2020c) include the wish to spend money on relief efforts without congressional authorization (e.g., Aratani, 2020; Smith, 2020d) (for other examples, see Goñi et al., 2020; Holden, 2020a; Lakhani, 2020). Second, the country is condemned for its *racist* and *xenophobic* rhetoric toward China (e.g., Pilkington, 2020e; Singh, 2020; Tempelman, 2020; Tisdall, 2020d). As argued in the UK: "It is deeply disappointing to hear the President of the United States, Donald Trump, call coronavirus the China virus and give legitimacy to this racist trope" (*Hansard*, 13 September 2020 col 122WH). Third, the US faces criticism for acting against wider shared interests and values, by pursuing *vaccine nationalism* (e.g., *Hansard,* 13 July 2020 col 1410; *Kamerstukken II* 2019/20, 2020D10851), and challenging international organizations (e.g., Borger, 2020b; Editorial, 2020b; Vlaskamp, 2020). Such acts are at odds with UK's and NL's wish for solidarity and global cooperation in the fight against the pandemic (e.g., *Hansard,* 5 May 2020 col 398; *Kamerstukken II* 2019/20, 26 150, nr. 187, p. 17; Omar & Hunt-Hendrix, 2020; Tisdall, 2020a). As argued by Baroness Northover: "All should now be able to see that strengthening the WHO is in everyone's interests, yet the United States, far from seeking to bring countries together, threatens the WHO's funding" (*Hansard,* 18 May 2020 col 933).

Although this "authoritarian", "racist", and "unilateral" behavior is in line with a broader case-specific trend (i.e., the Trump-effect, see alternative explanations), it appears to

have gained momentum during the pandemic as it further illuminated US' "dismissal of the international standards that we have been working towards over many years since the Second World War" (*Hansard,* 18 April 2020 col 936).

Furthermore, empirical manifestations support the proposition that the values associated with the country's Covid-19 response are *condemned* (5.b.). As anticipated, this criticism is predominantly focused upon the US' decision to reopen the economy, despite the cases (e.g., Beckett, 2020; Freedland, 2020a; Lanting, 2020; Lutz, 2020; Rushe & Greve, 2020). The choice for the "disease" rather than the "medicine" is described as *cold-blooded* (Pilkington, 2020d) and *controversial* (Salam et al., 2020). Most importantly, this unpopular approach is linked to its presumed underlying values of "capitalism" (e.g., Bryant & Laughland, 2020) and "neoliberalism" (e.g., Craze & Invernizzi-Accetti, 2020; Watts, 2020). By claiming that the country and its president are obsessed with the economy (Editorial, 2020c), it is argued that Trump dismissed the crisis until "he saw a 1,000-point drop on Wall Street" (Smith, 2020e) (for a similar argument, see McCarthy, 2020a). The following quote accurately depicts how this approach conflicts with the values in the target states: "But unlike the US states that rushed to reopen too soon, that so clearly prioritized economic recovery over human life, the EU countries are saying they'd rather take the financial hit than see more of their citizens die" (Prose, 2020a).

Even though the evidence supporting the third proposition is also likely to be somewhat distorted by the Trump-effect, the president of the US seemed to serve as the *avatar of an unideal* (6.b.). Whereas Ardern symbolized attractive female leadership, Trump's Covid-19 response is associated with its opposite: "toxic masculinity" (e.g., Dembroff, 2020; Solnit, 2020). An example of behavior fitting into this rubric is the reluctance to wear face masks: "Trump is determined to be a manly man at all costs – even if it means encouraging the American people to not wear masks" (Prose, 2020b). Freedland argues how "Trumpism" (2020b) is associated with this form of "machismo", linked to rightwing populism and "strongmen" values (Jarral, 2020). Like in NZ, certain values underpinning the countries leadership, are coupled with the country's performance during the crisis (1.b.): "If you look at where in the world populism is manifesting itself - Trump, Johnson, Bolsenaro - these are countries that are struggling with corona. You may have to do something with that. People value reliability, administrative fairness" (Korteweg, 2020b, own translation).

As such, the mechanistic evidence supporting the propositions associated with social attraction (NZ) and aversion (US), is less conclusive. Whilst NZ was occasionally admired for acting according to specific values, most attention is directed at Ardern, who represents the *avatar of an ideal.* When considering the US, it is more obvious how the country's actions against particular values and interests led to aversion. Nonetheless, as described below, the finding asks for a cautious interpretation due to case-specific characteristics.

Alternative Explanations

This section cautiously touches upon detected observables that suggest the presence of multiple case-specific alternative explanations that may have affected the causal mechanisms of interest.

First, it is worth noting that even before the pandemic, the relationship between the agent and the target states was already moving in the observed direction. For instance, in both the UK and the NL, the relationship with the US was approached with hesitance in the first months of 2020, as it was underscored that the country was acting against certain values (social aversion) (e.g., *Hansard,* 30 January 2020 col 370WH; *Kamerstukken II* 2019/20, 2020Z00317). To be specific, it is argued that the alliance with the US "has changed from the old pattern of 70 years past, and that even before Trump appeared it was clear that [their] world views no longer coincided" (*Hansard*, 7 January 2020 col 67). Accordingly, the opposite trend was visible in NZ. For example, the UK expressed the wish to *reunite* with the "like-minded" country on multiple occasions (e.g., *Hansard*, 30 January 2020 col 1002). A similar desire for closer cooperation, while to a lesser extent, was detected in the NL (e.g., *Kamerstukken II* 2019/20, 28 676, nr. 332, p. 16). Therefore, the potential impact of the Covid-19 response could be considered as an intensification of a pre-existing trend, rather than an independent new effect.

Second, there is reason to believe that Trump's adverse image might have magnified the effect of rational and social aversion. For instance, as described in the previous section, a lot of criticism tied to US' Covid-19 response is related directly to the president (see evidence in support of 6.b.). This Trump-effect becomes even more clear when Biden's victory was met with appreciation (e.g., *Hansard*, 19 November 2020 col 495) and renewed hopes for an alliance based on shared values (e.g., *Hansard*, 24 November 2020 col 674; *Kamerstukken II* 2019/20, 2021D08632, nr. 32, p. 5).

Third, it is likely that the US is judged more harshly, because of its global reputation as the "the so-called leader of the free" (*Hansard*, 17 March 2020 col 781). For instance, it is underscored multiple times that the country failed to combat the pandemic, even though it is a "superpower" (e.g., *Hansard*, 18 May 2020 col 933; Pilkington, 2020c) or the "wealthiest

country in the world" (e.g., Holpuch, 2020a). Furthermore, the country's unilateral behavior on the international stage is often linked to the country's status of a "global leader", as it is argued that US' "lack of international leadership has been quite extraordinary" (*Hansard*, 17 March 2020 col 781) (for similar arguments, see Bossema, 2020; Editorial, 2020b). By making unilateral decisions, Trump was not only acting against the interest of other countries (4.b.), but was also "trashing America's reputation as a responsible and trustworthy actor in world affairs, and making it clear he has no interest in accepting the responsibility which comes from being the leader of the richest and most influential country in the world" (Gawthorpe, 2020).

Discussion & Conclusion

To date, the academic field remains divided regarding the conditions that allow states to gain or lose soft power. In order to contribute to this lack of understanding, the present study explored how countries' Covid-19 response affected their attractiveness abroad through rational and/or social appeal (or aversion). While acknowledging that "like a river, a country's image has many sources" (Matteucci, 2005), both theories offer some valuable insight concerning the mechanisms that might be involved. In the following section the key findings and their theoretical implications are discussed.

First, evidence hinting at the presence of rational attraction/aversion was found in both NZ and the US. As such, there is reason to believe that perceived (in)competency and success indeed could have affected countries' attractiveness abroad. Several observations ask for further elaboration. For instance, the diagnostic evidence went in the exact opposite direction for both agent countries (i.e., success vs. failure; among the best vs. among the worst). Although this is consistent with what generally would be expected when two diverse cases representing extreme values are sampled, it suggests that rational attraction bears a somewhat "structural" rather than "case-specific" character. Second, the findings challenge the assumption that "likeness goes with liking", as they illuminate how dissimilarities associated with success might have sparked attraction and emulation, while sharing certain similarities had the opposite effect. However, these results ask for a cautious interpretation. Given the potential Trump-effect and other alternative explanations, one might wonder to what extent the conclusions are transferable to other cases. Perhaps the US is judged more harshly, simply because it is the US.

Second, the findings suggest that countries' Covid-19 response might have led to either social attraction or aversion among foreign audiences. However, these arguments seem rather inconclusive. For instance, NZ received little praise for playing according to the rules. The

appreciation was mostly focused upon Ardern's leadership, which served as the example of desirable leadership (or, the *avatar of an ideal*). Perhaps when the scope condition already involves standards of behavior, policies that fit within these confines are less noteworthy. Taking a look at the US, it becomes more apparent how acting against values might have damaged the country's attractiveness. However, this norm-violating behavior fits into a broader trend, given the fact that Trump was accused of similar tendencies outside of the setting of the pandemic.

Consequently, whereas rational attraction stems from the sudden opportunity to prove oneself amidst a crisis, social attraction seems to be rooted in some form of continuity. While, as argued by the *Similarity-Attraction Theory*, the latter elicits aversion through dissimilarity, the opposite applies to the former. Nevertheless, some form of interconnectedness is observed between the two. To be specific, some of the discussed values were associated with either a "good" or "bad" Covid-19 response. This raises questions regarding the subjectivity of perceived competence. Consider the following counterfactual: if the US had actually successfully combated the crisis under the same government, would it be used as an example? If so, in what form and to what extent?

The research knows several limitations and suggestions for further research. First, the study's scope condition seriously constraints the generalizability of the findings. By selecting countries that belong to the same Anglosphere (or, Western) in-group, the paper suffers from a strong Western focus. Furthermore, while the scope condition allows to test the effect of social proximity, a critical reader might wonder whether the effect would be the same for countries that are less similar. For example, why did Vietnam's attractiveness abroad change only slightly (Brand Finance, 2021), even though the country performed equally well? Is it because countries are more willing to learn from each other when they already share similarities in the first place, potentially resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy? To solve this puzzle, future research should adopt a less Western-oriented approach and test the effect of rational and social attraction among dissimilar countries.

Second, the selection of left-leaning news sources further limits the scope of the study. Relaxing the unitary-actor assumption could allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the sources of attraction. For example, it would be helpful to investigate whether the same observations detected in this study are also present in right-leaning sources. Currently, given NZ's leftwing government, the magnitude of the country's rational and social appeal may be exaggerated. The reverse is likely to be true for the US.

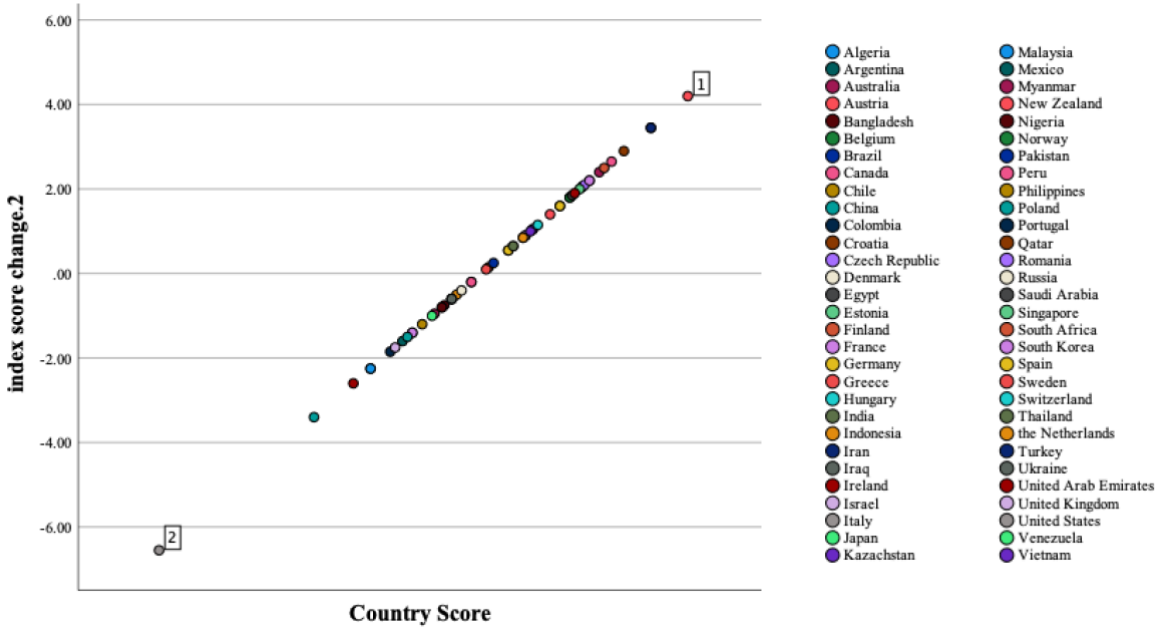
Third, the paper specifically addressed how a country's Covid-19 response affected its attractiveness abroad. While instructive, alternative explanations within the context of the pandemic demand further investigation. For instance, there is reason to believe that certain deficiencies revealed by the pandemic (e.g., bad health system or inequality), could have damaged a country's reputation. At the same time, the pandemic brought with it a vast amount of scientific breakthroughs as well as other contributions provided by non-governmental entities. The potential impact of such activities on a country's soft power is worth exploring.

Last, the present study merely captures a snapshot of the dynamic sequences that constitute soft power. To comprehend the volatile nature and power of countries' appeal, a detailed understanding of the broader context is demanded. While the restricted time period fitted the purpose of the study, the findings only tell half the story. For instance, the latest Global Soft Power Index (Brand Finance, 2022), reveals that the attraction gained during the crisis did not last long. To be sure, the index illustrates how the US again claims the first place in the ranking, after "turning corner on COVID-19", while NZ lost some spots (Brand Finance, 2022). This trend resembles patterns associated with the rally-around-the-flag effect, which posits that national leaders *temporarily* enjoy a favorable approval rate during a crisis (Baker & Oneal, 2001). Future research should investigate how insights from literature on this RRTF-effect relate to soft power, and test how they perform when countries rather than individuals serve as the unit of analysis. For now, what becomes evident is that as much as change can be subtle or conspicuous, it is first and foremost *constant*.

Appendix A

Figure 1

Scatter Plot of Revised Index Score Change for Sixty Countries (2020-2021)



Note. This scatter plot demonstrates the change in soft power for sixty countries between 2020 and 2021. Adapted from Global Soft Power Index (2020 and 2021) by Brand Finance. source:

Note. 1: New Zealand; 2: United States.

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