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To cite this article: Travis Nelson (2021): Captain America? On the relationship between Hollywood blockbusters and American soft power, Globalizations, DOI: [10.1080/14747731.2020.1859759](https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2020.1859759)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2020.1859759>



Published online: 14 Jan 2021.



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## Captain America? On the relationship between Hollywood blockbusters and American soft power

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### ABSTRACT

In 30 years, Hollywood movies have gone from making a majority of their money domestically to making a majority of their money internationally. This significant shift is underappreciated in scholarship such as International Relations research on soft power. This article argues that, counterintuitively, a growing global audience for Hollywood movies has diluted any soft power effect for the United States by globalizing their production and inducing content changes related to both setting and genre. In a globalized world, the connection between hard and soft power is more complicated than is traditionally understood.

### KEYWORDS

Globalization; soft power; public opinion; film; Hollywood

In 1990, Joseph Nye introduced the concept of soft power to refer to the ability of a state to get what it wants through attraction rather than coercion and payments (Nye, 1990). The concept caught on and became a useful lens by which to provide a more nuanced understanding of, among other things, the dominant position of the United States at the end of the Cold War (Nye, 2004a, p. x). Since that time, though, the power structure of the world has changed significantly. There has been a relative American decline in hard power measures related to the economy and the military, and a slew of complications related to Nye's soft power triumvirate of culture, political ideals, and foreign policies. This article will reassess the concept of soft power today by looking at one such factor: the global standing of the American film industry.

Although understudied in the International Relations literature, Hollywood is a significant part of the United States' global footprint. Economically, the American motion picture and television industry supported two million jobs and \$134 billion in total wages in 2015 and was responsible for \$17.8 billion in exports ([www.mpaa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Economic-Contribution-of-the-Motion-Picture-Television-Industry-to-the-United-States-2017.pdf](http://www.mpaa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Economic-Contribution-of-the-Motion-Picture-Television-Industry-to-the-United-States-2017.pdf)). Notably, the 'industry runs a trade surplus larger than each of the surpluses in the advertising, mining, telecommunications, legal, information, and health related services sectors' ([www.mpaa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Economic-Contribution-of-the-Motion-Picture-Television-Industry-to-the-United-States-2017.pdf](http://www.mpaa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Economic-Contribution-of-the-Motion-Picture-Television-Industry-to-the-United-States-2017.pdf)).

The American film industry is, in fact, even more globally dominant now than it was 30 years ago when the concept of soft power was introduced. Take, for instance, the biggest movies of 1989 and 2016. In both of these years there was a Batman movie (*Batman* in 1989 and *Batman v. Superman* in 2016), a Ghostbusters movies (*Ghostbusters II* in 1989 and *Ghostbusters* in 2016),

and an animated Disney movie set largely underwater (*The Little Mermaid* in 1989 and *Finding Dory* in 2016). One significant difference, though, is that in 1989, 22 out of the top 30 movies made the majority of their money in the United States. *Steel Magnolias*, *Uncle Buck*, *Fletch Lives*, and *Say Anything*, for instance, made more than 80% of their total box office that year domestically. In 2016, however, only one of the top 30 movies, *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, received a majority (50.4%) of its box office in the United States. Blockbusters such as *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, *X-Men: Apocalypse*, *Warcraft*, and *Ice Age: Collision Course* made more than 70% of their money internationally.

One might think that his shift, from Hollywood blockbusters having a primarily domestic audience to having a primarily global audience, would amplify American soft power and therefore increase its relative power share overall. After all, culture in general clearly remains an important soft power asset of the United States. For instance, despite being ranked in third place overall, the United States has a clear command of first place in the cultural soft power section of the 2017 Soft Power Index (<http://softpower30.com/> Accessed: October 9, 2020).

Culture is the most potent of America's soft power resources and the nation's cultural and creative outputs have tremendous global reach ... America's film, television, and music industries continue to set the pace and trends for the rest of the world and it is unlikely that the dominance of Hollywood will decline anytime soon. ([softpower30.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/The-Soft-Power-30-Report-2017-Web-1.pdf](http://softpower30.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/The-Soft-Power-30-Report-2017-Web-1.pdf) [pp. 45–46])

As presented in this report, the global expansiveness of American culture (film and otherwise) clearly translates to American soft power.

I argue here, though, that the situation is more complicated. I find that there is no discernable empirical relationship between expanding Hollywood box office and global public opinion of the United States (the latter being an oft-used indicator of soft power). Instead, the shift to a more global Hollywood audience has had effects that complicate the relationship between cultural product and soft power as typically understood. Specifically, the result has been a more globalized production and distribution of 'American' movies and significant content changes related to both setting and genre. I argue that an expanded global audience has had the effect, somewhat counterintuitively, of de-Americanizing American films and has therefore lessened the effect of any accompanying soft power expansion.

The article will proceed as follows. First, I will look more carefully at existing work in International Relations on both soft power and the film industry more generally. The next section consists of an empirical examination of global box office, public opinion, and the relationship between the two. The final section will discuss the results of the analysis and will conclude by reviewing the argument and considering other avenues of research related to Hollywood and International Relations.

## Literature review

As discussed in the introduction, the academic literature on soft power centres on the work of Joseph Nye. He introduced the concept at the end of the Cold War and has revisited and reappraised it several times since. One such reappraisal occurred in 2004, a time when the United States was emmeshed in wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan and was, as Nye saw it, struggling in terms of soft power.

We have been more successful in the domain of hard power, where we have invested more, trained more, and have a clearer idea of what we are doing. We have been less successful in the area of soft power, where our public diplomacy has been woefully inadequate and our neglect of allies and institutions has created a sense of illegitimacy that has squandered our attractiveness. (Nye, 2004b)

Nye argued that the global unpopularity of the United States' foreign policy could even be weakening its cultural soft power with 'consumers in 30 countries signal[ing] their disenchantment with America by being less likely to buy Nike products or eat at McDonalds' (Nye, 2004b, p. 256). Here and elsewhere, Nye envisions hard and soft power as distinctly important components of a state's foreign policy toolkit and as linked in that success (or failure) at one can enhance (or diminish) the other.

This article expands on this line of argument by considering the effects of the significant global expansion of the American film industry over the past 30 years. At least on the surface, Nye's formulation would seem to suggest that this expansion could be both evidence of and a contribution to the soft power of the United States. The idea would be that the popularity of American films should spread American norms and increase the public perception of the United States in other countries. Normative development and positive public opinion could then influence foreign policy decisions in a direction favourable to the United States.

If a state can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes. If its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow. If it can establish international norms consistent with its society, it is less likely to have to change. (Nye, 1990, p. 167)

By this reasoning, the cultural power of a globally expanding American film industry should bring with it practical political results. I will argue, though, that this is not the case and that, just as Nye saw the success of American hard power as linked to the success of its soft power, the rise in global economic hard power (seen here in global box office sales) has indirectly diluted the impact of American cultural soft power.

There is, of course, considerable literature on soft power outside of the work of Joseph Nye. One such strand of literature is that on the use of soft power as an intentional foreign policy strategy by states such as China and South Korea. China, for instance, has engaged in a twenty-first century 'charm offensive' to expand its soft power presence in Asia and beyond (Blanchard & Lu, 2012; Kurlantzick, 2006; Lampton, 2007; Shambaugh, 2003). This charm offensive has been conducted by, among other things, establishing Confucius Institutes in 140 countries, expanding foreign aid efforts in Africa and elsewhere, and generally promoting Chinese culture (*The Economist*, 2017). Some evidence suggests that these efforts have been successful and that public perception of China has improved over the past twenty years (Nelson & Carlson, 2012). Christopher Walker has even argued that these and other initiatives have allowed China and other authoritarian regimes to exploit opportunities presented by globalization and create a sort of 'mirror image of democratic soft power' (Walker, 2016, p. 51) that enables them to coopt their Western partners and induce self-censorship (Walker, 2016, p. 52). Other studies, though, have found that when one drills into the details of survey questions or considers China's concurrent expansion of hard power, actual Chinese soft power in Asia continues to be weak (Holyk, 2011).

*Hallyu* (the 'Korean wave' of culture) is another recent example of soft power policy in action. Promotion of *hallyu* has been a deliberate tool of the South Korean government (Suntikul, 2019) and has seen enormous success in both music (see: the rise the BTS and other K-pop bands) and film (see: the 2020 Best Picture Oscar win for Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*).

According to the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry's Global Artist Chart, South Korean boy-band BTS were the second best-selling artists of 2018 worldwide, and the only non-English speaking artist to enter the chart. As of 2019, the group accounted for \$4.65 billion (£3.5 billion) of South Korea's GDP – and they became the first Asian band to surpass 5 billion streams on Spotify. (Ro, 2020)

Research on both the Chinese charm offensive and South Korea's *hallyu* are examples of work on soft power expanding beyond its initial development in the American context.

Another broad strand of soft power research is on the effectiveness of and methodology surrounding soft power more generally. As mentioned in the introduction, the USC Center for Public Diplomacy uses objective data and international polling to create an annual Soft Power Index that Nye has called 'the clearest picture of soft power to date' (McClorry, 2017). This and similar research has done a lot of work in providing empirical support to soft power theory. Scholars such as Goldsmith and Horiuchi, on the other hand, question the falsifiability of soft power effectiveness as typically understood. 'By stressing general factors that show limited variation over time, however, we feel that Nye fails to provide a theory for understanding when soft power affects international outcomes' (Goldsmith & Horiuchi, 2012, p. 558). They focus instead on the more specific issue of public favourability of American foreign policy and find that, at least on issues with high salience, favourability can have an effect on international outcomes. A related debate in the literature involves the question of whether soft power is really just an extension of hard power that is 'only available to powerful large nations like America' (Lovric, 2016, p. 32) and whether the typical tools to measure it (public opinion surveys and feeling thermometers) can really capture whatever independent effect soft power might have (Datta, 2009; Keohane & Katzenstein, 2007, pp. 273–305).

In addition to contributing to research on soft power, this article also contributes to the much more limited International Relations literature on film and the film industry. Beyond the work on soft power already mentioned, there is a strand of existing research that draws from Yuen Foong Khong's work on analogies at war<sup>1</sup> to examine the role of Hollywood films in shaping Americans' narratives about their wars and themselves.

This book is about the movies that have done the most to shape our memories and impressions of the nation's wars. Our feelings about wars are often generated less by what we read or hear in lectures than by visual images, complemented by powerful dialogue, that make them unforgettable. (Jeansonne & Lührssen, 2014, p. xi)

Khong and others have argued that films not only reflect the society in which they are made (Celli, 2011), they can also play a role in forming society and how that society is perceived by the rest of the world. Furthermore, as Stephen Hart argues, the stories told by Hollywood can themselves be shaped when foreign directors such as Alejandro González Iñárritu and Alfonso Cuarón (or French New Wave directors in the 1950s and 1960s) gain influence in the industry (Hart, 2017). By looking at the ways that a dramatically globalized audience have affected the content and impact of Hollywood films, this article expands on these arguments.

### Box office, public opinion, and soft power

The article examines the effects of an increasingly global audience for Hollywood films on American soft power. To better understand this relationship empirically, I look at two pieces of data: Hollywood box office by country and public opinion of the United States by country. Both of

these are similar to the data used by the Soft Power Index and other researchers to understand the measurable sources and effects of soft power.

As discussed above, a very straightforward reading of soft power theory would suggest that there should be a positive relationship between box office and public opinion. The causality, though, could potentially run in either direction. One possibility would be that a country whose population is already attracted to American culture would be more likely to consume that culture through box office sales. The other possibility is that exposure to American culture through the box office will then make that culture more attractive to the population-at-large. In either case, the positive public opinion would represent a contribution to American soft power and should in theory result in demonstrable practical effects. Looking at box office and public opinion simply tests a link in this larger soft power causal chain.

To measure box office by country, I use data available from Box Office Mojo (<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/> Accessed: August 5, 2019) to identify the top 30 movies (by worldwide gross) in a given year. I then exclude any movie (such as *The Mermaid (Mei Ren Yu)* produced by Hehe Pictures in China in 2016 or *Princess Mononoke* produced by Studio Ghibli in Japan in 1997) that was made entirely outside of the Hollywood system. The difficulty in precisely defining ‘Hollywood’ (and ‘American’) movies will be discussed in the analysis section below, but I will for now note that the list is comprised of movies (such as *Avengers*, *Black Panther*, and *Star Wars*) that are typically thought of as Hollywood blockbusters.

The box office gross of these top 30 movies can then be broken down by domestic (gross box office from the United States and Canada) and international (gross box office from every other country). As noted in the introduction, one interesting finding from this initial analysis is that in the last 30 years total international box office has significantly overtaken total domestic box office.

Table 1 presents global (combined domestic and international), domestic, and international box office for the top 30 movies from 1989 to 2018. There are clear trends in the data. The percent of total global box office that comes from domestic theaters, for instance, has gone down steadily: from 53.4% in 1989 to 43.8% in 2003 to 35.6% in 2018. It is certainly notable that only one-third of the total gross of today’s biggest Hollywood blockbusters comes from domestic audiences. Furthermore, the few recent movies that receive a majority of their box office domestically (such as *Black Panther*, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*; and *The LEGO Batman Movie*) do so by very slim margins. This is all a significant change since 1989.

Box Office Mojo also tracks international box office for Hollywood movies by country. Table 2 presents a shortened version of this data (including here only the top five and bottom five rows)<sup>2</sup> with columns for 2005 and 2015 box office, and a final column indicating the difference between the two. As with Table 1, this includes only the top 30 grossing movies of each year. Note as well that Box Office Mojo reports some data sub-regionally (from ‘Central America’ or ‘East Africa’). This sub-regional data was excluded from the country-level analysis here, which means some smaller countries were not included in the final results.

It is notable that for almost every individual country, there was a substantial increase in total box office from 2005 to 2015. The only exceptions came from a country (Japan) with a sizable domestic movie industry of its own and two countries (Iceland and Greece) that were hit particularly hard by the 2008 global economic crisis. Also, although China, the United Kingdom, and South Korea saw the biggest increases in total dollars, if one controls for population, the biggest increases in box office were Singapore, Hong Kong, and Australia.

**Table 1.** Box office data for top 30 grossing Hollywood movies.

Year	Global Box Office (in millions USD)	Domestic Box Office (in millions USD)	International Box Office (in millions USD)	Percent Domestic Box Office	Number of Films in Top 30 with More than 50% Domestic
1989	4318.4	2306	2011.8	53.4	22
1990	4837.8	2445.7	2391.6	50.6	18
1991	3967.8	1974.6	1992.9	49.8	20
1992	5298.3	2572.1	2726.2	48.5	13
1993	5624.5	2500.3	3124	44.5	12
1994	6550.5	2856.9	3693.7	43.6	10
1995	6468.6	2631	3837.7	40.7	9
1996	6871.8	3093.8	3777.9	45.0	10
1997	9184.4	3610.6	5574	39.3	9
1998	7571.9	3408.5	4163.3	45.0	8
1999	8962.8	4130.9	4831.9	46.1	10
2000	7813.9	3893	3921	49.8	15
2001	9489.1	4339.3	5150.2	45.7	9
2002	10178.7	4927.1	5251.5	48.4	14
2003	10153.1	4442.3	5710.7	43.8	13
2004	10741.4	4709.8	6031.6	43.8	8
2005	10004.9	4375	5629.9	43.7	7
2006	10098.6	4236.8	5861.6	42.0	9
2007	12358.5	5204.5	7154.3	42.1	11
2008	12136.3	4881	7255.3	40.2	8
2009	15368.3	6058.9	9309.6	39.4	9
2010	14117.1	5324.8	8792.2	37.7	3
2011	14527.7	5079.6	9448.1	35.0	4
2012	16928.6	5931.8	10997.1	35.0	2
2013	16238.1	5760	10478	35.5	1
2014	16184.3	5667.3	10516.9	35.0	5
2015	19141.6	6811.1	12330.6	35.6	2
2016	17623.6	6392.1	11231	36.3	1
2017	19529.0	6564.4	12964.9	33.6	2
2018	19581.3	6962.4	12618.9	35.6	5

The next step in the analysis is to add a measure of public opinion and test for a relationship between by-country consumption of Hollywood movies and opinion of the United States. Pew Global has surveyed countries around the world about topics including favourability of the United States since 2000 (<http://www.pewglobal.org/> Accessed: August 20, 2018). Pew reports favourability of the United States as a percentage of the population indicating a favourable opinion of the United States. As indicated in Table 3, the 2015 favourability scores range from 14% favourability of the United States in Jordan to 92% favourability in the Philippines (Data available at <http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/06/23/1-americas-global-image/> [Accessed: August 11, 2017]). It is important to note that overall favourability ratings are not particularly nuanced ways to measure a country's

**Table 2.** Country-level box office data for top 30 grossing Hollywood movies.

Country	Total Box Office (2005)	Total Box Office (2015)	Box Office Difference (2015-2005)
China	\$65,169,745	\$2,102,772,827	\$2,037,603,082
United Kingdom	\$876,075,503	\$1,291,106,133	\$415,030,630
South Korea	\$223,808,279	\$526,753,250	\$302,944,971
Brazil	\$145,270,167	\$438,089,907	\$292,819,740
Mexico	\$283,041,286	\$529,575,184	\$246,533,898
Slovenia	\$3,738,134	\$5,941,345	\$2,203,211
Nigeria	\$125,968	\$2,069,356	\$1,943,388
Iceland	\$7,954,797	\$6,468,861	-\$1,485,936
Greece	\$41,122,143	\$35,289,117	-\$5,833,026
Japan	\$572,464,599	\$552,868,397	-\$19,596,202



**Table 3.** Favourability of the United States by country.

Country	United States Favourability (2015)
Philippines	92%
Ghana	89%
South Korea	84%
Kenya	84%
Italy	83%
Israel	81%
Ethiopia	81%
Senegal	80%
Burkina Faso	79%
Vietnam	78%
Tanzania	78%
Nigeria	76%
Uganda	76%
Poland	74%
South Africa	74%
France	73%
Brazil	73%
India	70%
Peru	70%
Ukraine	69%
Canada	68%
Japan	68%
Chile	68%
Mexico	66%
Spain	65%
United Kingdom	65%
Australia	63%
Indonesia	62%
Malaysia	54%
Venezuela	51%
Germany	50%
China	44%
Argentina	43%
Lebanon	39%
Turkey	29%
Pakistan	22%
Russia	15%
Jordan	14%

soft power. Holyk, for instance, advocates breaking soft power down into its constituent parts with more specific and focused survey questions (Holyk, 2011). For present purposes, though, overall favourability provides a useful overall measure.

The basic soft power theory described above, again, would predict a positive relationship between favourability and box office. In actuality, though, a basic correlational test found no discernable relationship between 2015 favourability and 2015 box office. The correlation between these two variables was only 0.106. Note that in computing the correlation I controlled for the size of a country by dividing the box office gross of a country by its population.

To explore the relationship more fully and to control more carefully for other relevant variables, I also conducted a regression analysis with box office gross as the dependent variable and favourability as the key independent variable. I then added population, exports from the United States, and GDP as other independent variables. The measure of population is taken from the World Bank (World Bank population data available at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL> [Accessed: August 11, 2017]), and the expectation is that population will be positively associated with box office gross. The more people in the country, the more potential movie consumers.



GDP data is also taken from the World Bank (World Bank GDP data available at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD> [Accessed: August 11, 2017]) and is also expected to be positively associated with box office gross. The wealthier the country, the more likely the people in that country are to consume movies. Trade data is taken from the United States Census Bureau (Census Bureau Trade data available at <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/index.html> [Accessed: August 11, 2017]) with an expectation again of a positive relationship. The idea here is that countries that are consuming other American products are also likely to be consumers of American movies (Table 4).

The results of the regression analysis are clear. Population, GDP, and exports are all significant predictors of box office gross. Only GDP and exports, though, are significant in the expected directions. Population has a significantly negative relationship, meaning that smaller population numbers are associated with higher box office results. This bears further examination but may simply mean that, once GDP is controlled for, the relatively high box office receipts from relatively small countries such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and the United Arab Emirates are having a significant effect.

Regardless, though, favourability of the United States is not significant. Note that, because the relationship between box office and favourability could theoretically go in either direction, I also ran a regression analysis with favourability as the dependent variable. Furthermore, to check for a lagged effect, I ran a regression with 2005 box office gross as an independent variable (and 2015 favourability as the dependent variable). Neither of these additional regressions showed any relationship between box office and favourability. Taken together, all of the correlation and regression data in this section provide no evidence for the basic soft power theory that exposure to American movies enhances the soft power of the United States as measured in favourability ratings.

## Analysis and conclusions

This article begins with the fact that the audience for Hollywood movies has grown increasingly global over the past twenty years and asks whether, following soft power theory, this has translated into a soft power surge for the United States. The empirical analysis, looking at the relationship between box office gross and favourability of the United States, found no such relationship. This section will explore possible explanations for these findings and will argue that the absence of a relationship still teaches us something important about soft power.

**Table 4.** Regression analysis.

Variable	Coefficient (standard error)
Intercept	59108791.84 (111315106.8)
Favourability of the United States	−296888.3053 (1578007.659)
Population (in thousands)	−304.4216798** (134.0846447)
GDP (in current USD)	207.4983747*** (22.75803383)
Exports from the United States (in million USD)	1474.28694* (771.069569)

$R^2 = 0.88$ ;  $n = 30$ .

\*, \*\*, and \*\*\* denote significance at the 10%, 5%, and 1% level respectively.

The first possible set of explanations for the empirical findings is basically that the critics of soft power are right. It may simply be, for instance, that there is no connection between cultural intrusion and the power of a country. Individuals may, for instance, watch American movies but still resent the cultural (and other) imperialism that they represent or, as will be discussed a little differently below, may not associate the movies with American norms and values at all. As explored in film studies and communication literature, there are a range of explanations for global variance in genre and other movie preference (Fu, 2013; Verboord & Brandellero, 2018).

Another version of this argument is that the spread of American movies does have a soft power effect, but it is just too small or difficult to pick up methodologically. A possible problem with the empirical analysis in this article, for instance, is that the independent and dependent variables rely on different sample frames and that the individuals who are buying tickets for Hollywood movies may be qualitatively different than those who respond to Pew surveys. Or, relatedly, it may be that too many relevant individuals in other countries are watching these movies outside the theater system (by streaming or pirating, for example) and are therefore skewing the expected results. All of these are certainly plausible interpretations. I want to suggest, though, that there is another way to look at the results that sheds a more nuanced light on the complexity of soft power in a globalized world.

The first step in this alternative interpretation involves understanding that in a globalized world cultural content has become more complicated than can be easily accommodated by a straightforward soft power theory. To what extent, for instance, can a Hollywood movie really be considered an American cultural product? Take, for instance, the top grossing movie of 2016: *Captain America: Civil War*. Although 'America' is literally in the title of the film, it is in reality a very globalized production. The movie is a co-production of an American company (Marvel Studios), a German company (Studio Babelsberg), and a Dutch company (Vita-Ray Dutch Productions) and was filmed in the United States, Puerto Rico, Germany, and Norway. It was distributed by many companies including 2i Films from Slovenia, Cinecolor Films from Chile, and Meloman from Kazakhstan. Its special effects are the result of work from more than 20 different companies, including companies from the United States (Legacy Effects and Industrial Light and Magic), China (Base FX and Virtuos), Canada (Method Studios and Imagine Engine Design), Germany (Trixter Film and RISE Visual Effects Studio), the United Kingdom (Double Negative and Cinesite) and more. And it features actors from Romania (Sebastian Stan), the United Kingdom (Paul Bettany), Spain (Daniel Bruhl), Canada (Emily Van Camp), and more (All production information in this paragraph is taken from the Internet Movie Database: <http://www.imdb.com/> [Accessed: August 11, 2017]). How American is it really?

At the very least, the globalized nature of the production and distribution of *Captain America: Civil War* complicates the 'American' nature of it as a cultural product. Even if the movie is still broadly perceived as an 'American' movie, there is plenty of room for ideational fuzziness. The same is true of American products like the iPhone or Nike shoes. The globalized nature of their production, distribution, and endorsement complicates their connection as an American cultural product. This then complicates any argument that their consumption will translate to soft power for the United States.

Furthermore, it is important to understand that one effect of the shift towards Hollywood movies making a majority of their money from the international market is that these movies are increasingly produced with a global audience in mind. This is particularly true of China, where in 2015 22 new movie screens were built each day and which maintains a quota of just 34 imported movies each year (although this quota can be by-passed by co-productions and other maneuvers) (Beech, 2017).

When China was not the market, you just followed the American way. But these days, they ask me, ‘Do you think the China audience will like it?’ All the writers, producers – they think about China. Now China is the centre of everything. (Beech, 2017)

The thirst for the global audience affects both the types of big-budget movies that are produced and the content of those movies. *Iron Man 3*, for instance, includes four minutes of footage in the Chinese version, featuring Chinese locations and Chinese actors, that is not in the American version of the movie (Lussier, 2013). Similarly, the movie *Looper* changed the location of its futuristic plot from Paris to Shanghai when Chinese investors came on board and the possibility of getting through the Chinese quota system became more likely (Loffhagen, 2017). Conservative commentators such as Neil Cavuto have even started to complain that the heroes of American films are not ‘American’ enough. ‘*Wonder Woman* is out in theaters right now. Some are calling it less American because her outfit isn’t red, white, and blue, and, in order to appeal for foreign audiences, very little reference to America at all.’<sup>3</sup>

Further evidence of content changes accompanying box office globalization over the past 30 years can be found in Tables 5 and 6 below. Table 5 shows the number of top 30 movies (averaged over five-year periods) that are set entirely in the United States, set partially in the United States, and not set in the United States. The pattern in the data is unmistakable. Between 1989 and 1993, an average of 20.6 of the top 30 Hollywood movies each year was set entirely in the United States – and an average of only 3 of the top 30 movies each year was not set in the United States at all. Today, though, an average of only 6.2 of the top 30 movies are set entirely in the United States and an average of 13.6 are set somewhere else (in space, in China, in the ocean, in ancient Greece, etc.). Many, many fewer big movies are set entirely in the United States than was the case 30 years ago, and one plausible interpretation of this is that as box office has globalized, the choice of setting has changed to appeal more easily to a global audience. Content has shifted as audience has shifted.

Another way in which content has changed since 1989 involves genre. Table 6 shows the average number of the top 30 grossing movies each year that were from four key genres: action/adventure, animation, comedy, and drama. Genre data was taken from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) (<https://www.imdb.com/> [Accessed: August 1, 2019]). Specifically, I used the first genre listed by IMDb that was one of the four listed above. The few cases that had none of the four genres (all documentaries or horror movies) were excluded from the analysis.

As with setting, the genre patterns are clear. The average number of action/adventure and animated movies (typically seen as more marketable to a global audience) has grown significantly since 1989, and the average number of comedies and dramas (typically seen as less marketable to a global audience) has shrunk dramatically. In 2017, for instance, there were 19 action/adventure movies in the top 30 and not a single comedy. This is significantly different than 1989, when a third of the top 30 was comprised of comedies such as *Look Who’s Talking*, *Parenthood*, and *Uncle Buck* (each of

**Table 5.** Setting of top 30 grossing Hollywood movies.

Years	Average number set entirely in USA	Average number set partially in USA	Average number not set in USA
1989–1993	20.6	5.8	3
1994–1998	14.6	7.8	7.6
1999–2003	14	7.6	8.4
2004–2008	11.8	8.4	9.8
2009–2013	6	11.8	12.2
2014–2018	6.2	10.2	13.6

**Table 6.** Genre of top 30 grossing Hollywood movies.

Years	Average number action/adventure	Average number animation	Average number comedy	Average number drama
1989–1993	10.6	1.4	8	7.4
1994–1998	13.2	2.6	7.4	6.4
1999–2003	13.8	3	7	4.8
2004–2008	13	5.4	6	3.8
2009–2013	16.4	7.2	2.6	2.6
2014–2018	18.4	6.8	1.4	2.4

which was also set entirely in the United States). This change is further evidence that the content of Hollywood movies has changed as the audience for these movies has globalized.

A conclusion that can be drawn from the shifts described in the previous paragraphs is that soft power is connected to hard power in ways that are not typically understood. As discussed above, Nye makes the case that the hard and soft power of countries like the United States are connected in that soft power can help the United States achieve its hard power goals or that unpopular foreign policy like the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan can dampen global enthusiasm for its cultural soft power product. What's different about the analysis here is that it recognizes that the hard (and soft power) of other countries can independently impact the effects of American soft power. For instance, as the economic power of states such as China has grown, they have indirectly exerted their own soft power by influencing the content of American movies. A growing global economy may in this way almost automatically decrease American soft power through sheer capitalistic impulse. And as the American-ness of American movies decreases because of both globalized production and content changes, these movies are then less likely to spread American norms and values in the way that soft power theorists such as Joseph Nye suggest.

This is not to say that soft power is irrelevant or that it is indistinguishable from hard power. Rather, it is simply to point out that the two may be linked in unexpected ways. The evidence here suggests that the significant global amplification of America's cultural footprint (as represented by global box office) may have, counterintuitively, resulted in a dilution of America's cultural soft power – and that this dilution is a direct result of the still-growing economic clout of China and other countries. The expansion of global box office is an understudied phenomenon that points to broader soft power changes in a globalized world.

The exploration in this article of the connection between box office and soft power is just one possible avenue of research that is both interesting on its own and relevant to other debates in the field. Further research could explore the way that the content changes of globalized movie production and distribution are (or are not) influencing the way we understand and analogize wars and other international events. How might Hollywood influence the way we as a domestic and international community understand wars in Afghanistan and Iraq or issues such as immigration? Research could also explore the relationship between movies and other International Relations variables such as trade and conflict more generally. Do globalized production and distribution enhance the normative and economic connections between countries in meaningful ways? These and other questions surrounding the globalization of movies merit more attention.

## Notes

1. Khong, *Analogies at War*.
2. Full data is available upon request.

3. Quoted in 'Fox Panel Investigates Whether or Not the 'Wonder Woman' Movie is Patriotic Enough.' 2017. *Media Matters*. Available at <https://www.mediamatters.org/video/2017/06/02/fox-panel-investigates-whether-or-not-wonder-woman-movie-patriotic-enough/216768> [Accessed: August 11, 2017].

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my discussant and fellow Foreign Policy panelists at the 2019 International Studies Association-Midwest conference, a slew of colleagues at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, and the three anonymous *Globalizations* reviewers for their helpful comments and critiques at various stages of this project.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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