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Employer Image and Employer Branding: What We Know and What We Need to Know

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employer image, employer image management, recruitment, signaling theory, social identity theory, organizational attractiveness

Abstract

In this article, we review theory and research on employer image and employer branding published since 2001. The review is wide ranging. First, we define employer image and distinguish it from similar constructs such as reputation and identity. We find that the literature has used two conceptualizations of images: an elementalistic perspective (e.g., distinction between symbolic and instrumental organizational attributes) and a holistic perspective (i.e., overall ratings of organizational attractiveness). Second, we discuss the effects of favorable organizational images, including better recruitment outcomes, more differentiation, stronger emotional bonds, and financial returns. Third, we review the antecedents and formation of image with a focus on organizational (e.g., recruiters) and nonorganizational sources [e.g., word of mouth (WOM)]. Fourth, we discuss the theoretical mediating mechanisms responsible for image effects and the moderators of image-outcome relationships. Finally, we address practical implications in the form of employer brand management and provide future research suggestions.

INTRODUCTION

In the scholarly literature, interest in people’s perceptions of organizational image originated with recruitment researchers. Behind this interest was the idea that image perceptions might influence applicants’ attraction to firms as a place to work (Belt & Paolillo 1982, Gatewood et al. 1993, Highhouse et al. 1999, Turban & Keon 1993). In 2001, Cable & Turban (2001) published an influential conceptual paper that propelled a stream of research on better understanding the image that job seekers have about employers, and its antecedents, dimensions, and consequences. At around the same time, the scientific interest in employer image was mirrored by the rise of employer branding as one of the hot topics in HR practice.

This article reviews the literature on employer image and employer branding. We aim to focus more on learning (i.e., How has our understanding of employer image and our ability to manage it effectively changed over the years?) than on documenting activity (i.e., What has been done?). We envision a reader who stopped reading in this area after the Cable & Turban (2001) paper and reappears now, asking, “Do we understand employer image and employer image management better now than we did in 2001?” Therefore, we aim to conduct a review of the employer image and branding literature since 2001.

As the articles discussed are published in different fields (e.g., industrial–organizational psychology, advertising and marketing, organizational behavior and strategy, economics, management, and organizational communications), our review is selective and critical. We organize it around a heuristic model that brings together the knowledge gained about employer image and employer image management (**Figure 1**). First, we define employer image and seek to distinguish it from related constructs. Next, we discuss the measurement of employer image, distinguishing between specific elements of image and overall image. The following two sections report on the outcomes of employer image (i.e., Why is it important to study image in the first place?) and the antecedents of image. We then cover theoretical progress in understanding the mediating mechanisms that explain the influence of image on outcomes, and subsequently the moderators of the image–outcome

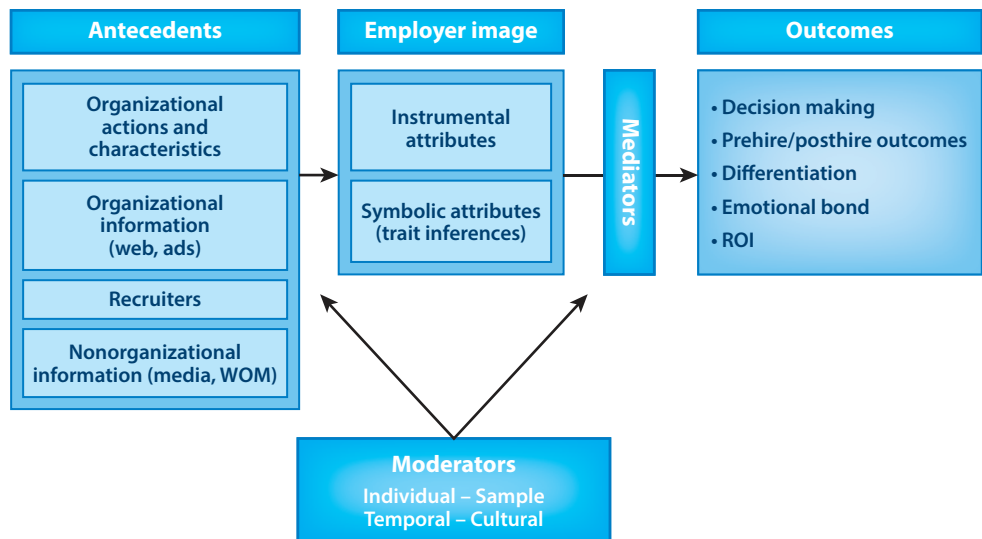


Figure 1

Heuristic model of antecedents, moderators, mediators, and outcomes of employer image. Abbreviations: ROI, return on investment; WOM, word of mouth.

relationships. We end with practical implications (i.e., How can employers manage the images they project?) and recommendations for future research.

EMPLOYER IMAGE AND RELATED CONSTRUCTS: DEFINITIONAL ISSUES

Employer image is the central construct of this review. Employer image, however, is not the only term used because there has been a proliferation of constructs in the literature. We begin, therefore, by clarifying the commonality and differences among these constructs. Our aim is not to invent new constructs; rather, we want to improve clarity among the already existing constructs. To this end, we draw upon excellent papers that have started to disentangle the various constructs (i.e., Brown et al. 2006, Highhouse et al. 2009).

Organizational Image

Let us begin with casting employer image in a broader framework because an organization's employment image (employer image) is only one of the possible images that individuals might hold of an organization. As such, employer image is part of the broader multidimensional construct of organizational image. The multiple organizational images result from various groups (e.g., stakeholders, constituencies, or corporate audiences) holding different images of the same organization. One might distinguish among at least three other images besides an organization's image as an employer. A first image is an organization's financial image. In addition, there is the image of an organization as a socially responsible performer and "good citizen" in the general society (also known as corporate social performance, CSP). Apart from financial image and CSP, customers and clients typically also hold an image of an organization as a provider of goods and services (i.e., an organization's product or service image).

Employer Image

In line with Highhouse et al. (2009), we define employer image as an amalgamation of transient mental representations of specific aspects of a company as an employer as held by individual constituents. Important elements in this definition include that an image (*a*) is held by individuals (versus the general public), (*b*) might fluctuate (versus being relatively stable), (*c*) targets specific aspects (versus an overall impression), and (*d*) is cognitive¹ in nature.

Employer Familiarity and Reputation

Employer image must be distinguished from employer familiarity/awareness and employer reputation. Employer familiarity/awareness is a necessary precursor of employer image and reputation because it is the cognitive evaluation of whether or not individual job seekers are aware of the organization (Cable & Turban 2001, Collins & Kanar 2013). Upon reviewing reputation definitions in various domains, Highhouse et al. (2009) referred to reputation as a global, temporally stable, evaluative judgment about an organization that is shared by the general public (or by multiple constituencies such as job seekers). As such, reputation differs from image in that reputation entails

¹This is especially so for the elementalistic approach to company employment image. As noted below, affective elements come also into play when a more holistic approach is followed.

Table 1 Differences and similarities between employer image and related constructs

	Focus	Stability	Level of analysis	Level of abstraction	Type of constituent	Marketing term
Familiarity/ awareness	Cognitive	Transient	Individual	Global	Outsider	Brand awareness
Reputation	Affective	Stable	Collective (general public)	Global	Primarily outsider	External brand (global evaluation)
Employer image	Cognitive (elementalistic) and/or affective (holistic)	Transient	Individual	Specific	Outsider	External brand (specific beliefs)
Identity	Cognitive	Enduring	Individual	Specific	Insider	Internal brand

a predominantly affective component. Other differences are that reputation² represents a more enduring evaluation, denoting how the general public feels about the organization. Therefore, it is possible that the general public has positive feelings toward an organization (positive reputation) but that an individual applicant might have a more negative view on the basis of specific experiences (negative image), or vice versa. For example, Rynes et al. (1991) found that job seekers' experiences with rude or inappropriate recruiters could lead to negative company images, even when the firm previously had a strong reputation among job seekers. Despite these differences, employer familiarity, employer reputation, and employer image are also related. Therefore, Cable & Turban (2001) placed them under the umbrella term of employer knowledge.

Identity

As shown in **Table 1**, it is also important to distinguish an organization's employer image from its identity. The latter refers to an organization's central, enduring, and distinctive characteristics (Dutton et al. 1994; but see Gioia et al. 2000). As such, a key difference is that identity is what organizational insiders (employees) perceive to be core characteristics, whereas image deals with an outsider's beliefs.

Employer Brand and Employer Branding

The terms employer brand and employer branding have also been used in HR practice; construct clarity is needed here. Instead of using other terms for similar constructs, we suggest tying these employer brand constructs to the definitional framework laid above. The external employer brand can then be mapped to an organization's employer image (i.e., an outsider's mental representations of attributes related to an organization as an employer), whereas the internal employer brand (i.e., an insider's mental representations of attributes related to an organization as an employer) corresponds to an organization's identity. External employer branding is then considered to be a synonym for employer image management. We equate the term internal employer branding with identity management (see Summary Point 1).

²A related construct is firm celebrity, which is defined as firms that attract a high level of public attention and generate positive emotional responses from stakeholder audiences. As such, similar to reputation it has an evaluative (even emotional) component (Rindova et al. 2006).

EMPLOYER IMAGE DIMENSIONS AND THEIR MEASUREMENT

Elementalistic Perspective: Focus on Instrumental and Symbolic Attributes

As noted, an organization's employer image reflects an amalgamation of mental representations and associations regarding an organization as an employer. This means that an employer image is made up of specific attributes that an individual associates with the organization as a place to work. Collins & Kanar (2013) refer to these associations as complex associations because they are not automatic (i.e., they require more cognitive processing). Although there exist various categorizations of these attributes, a well-known and longstanding categorization in marketing has been the distinction between functional (instrumental), symbolic, and experiential attributes (Keller 1993).

Instrumental and symbolic attributes have received the most attention in the recruitment field. Lievens & Highhouse (2003) presented the instrumental-symbolic framework to recruitment research. Instrumental attributes refer to job seekers' associations about more tangible attributes of the organization that have utilitarian value (e.g., location, pay, benefits, or advancement opportunities). Most researchers have followed an inductive strategy for determining and measuring these instrumental attributes because the instrumental attributes associated with employer image might differ across jobs and organizations. For example, in a military context, the opportunity to perform physical activities might be key, but not in other sectors. Accordingly, scales about instrumental attributes have typically been constructed ad hoc for a specific organization/industry. For example, Lievens & Highhouse (2003) developed different instrumental attribute scales for the banking and military sectors in Belgium. Other examples are scales developed by Agrawal & Swaroop (2009) that were used in India, or the employer image scale from Berthon et al. (2005) in Australia.

Research has also demonstrated the importance of symbolic attributes. These attributes denote inferences about organizations that describe the organization in terms of subjective and intangible attributes. They convey symbolic company information because people are attracted to these characteristics to express their values or to impress others (Highhouse et al. 2007). For example, people might refer to some organizations as trendy and others as prestigious. These symbolic attributes are also known as organization personality trait inferences (Slaughter et al. 2004). Slaughter et al. (2004, p. 86) defined organization personality as the "set of human personality characteristics perceived to be associated with an organization."

Various measures have been developed to capture these symbolic inferences. Lievens & Highhouse (2003) drew upon Aaker's (1991) work to develop scales for measuring Innovativeness, Competence, Sincerity, Prestige, and Ruggedness. Slaughter et al. (2004) conducted a comprehensive study to map the symbolic trait inferences across personality and marketing domains. Their measure had the following five scales: Boy Scout (re-labeled Trustworthiness by Kausel & Slaughter 2011), Innovativeness, Dominance, Thrift, and Style. Other less well-known examples are Otto et al.'s (2011) four-dimension measure (Honesty, Prestige, Innovation, and Power) and Davies et al.'s (2004) five-dimension corporate character measure (Agreeableness, Enterprise, Chic, Competence, and Ruthlessness).

Research found that, in general, symbolic organizational personality inferences explain incremental variance over instrumental attributes in job seekers' attraction to organizations (with instrumental attributes still explaining most variance; see, e.g., Lievens 2007, Lievens & Highhouse 2003, Slaughter & Greguras 2009). Research further showed symbolic trait inferences to be more generalizable than instrumental attributes. For example, Lievens & Highhouse's (2003) symbolic trait inference scales were cross-validated in various samples (potential applicants, actual applicants, and employees), industries, and cultures (e.g., Lievens 2007, Van Hove et al. 2013), as were those by Slaughter and coworkers (DeArmond & Crawford 2011, Kausel & Slaughter 2011, Walker et al. 2011).

In short, important progress has been made in measuring employer image dimensions. In terms of future research, we see the following important avenues. First, the measurement of any construct should be aligned with its conceptualization. However, this has not always been the case in this domain. Although several measures were developed under the label of employer image/employer brand (e.g., Maxwell & Knox 2009, Srivastava & Bhatnagar 2010, Tsai & Yang 2010), these scales often confounded employer and organizational images. Clearly, construct clarity should prevail in the development of future measures. Similarly, measures used in third-party employer branding certifications (e.g., Best Companies to Work For, Great Place to Work) should be designed on the basis of the best available evidence regarding the conceptualization of employer image. For instance, this means that both instrumental and symbolic attributes should be included and reliably measured. This has not always happened. Some third-party employment branding measures also confound reputation, image, and identity.

Second, we should conduct a comprehensive and integrative examination of the existing symbolic organizational personality inference measures to discover communalities and higher-order dimensions. The two fundamental dimensions underlying inferences in human interactions, namely warmth and competence (Fiske et al. 2002, Highhouse et al. 2009), might emerge as the meta-dimensions in this domain. As symbolic organizational personality inferences refer to social reputation (Hogan 1991, Slaughter et al. 2004) rather than internal cognitions or self-perceptions of behavioral patterns, it is more likely that these higher-order factors will reflect fundamental dimensions of social judgment than fundamental dimensions of human personality.

Third, recruitment researchers have thus far focused on the instrumental and symbolic attributes associated with employer image. Experiential attributes that refer to actual experiences with the employer through past applications or recruitment events have received less attention, although they are part of many classifications of brand attributes (Keller 1993). To add explorations of such experiential attributes, recruitment researchers could draw on recent developments in marketing. For example, in brand experience management, organizations invest in emotionally exciting marketing events and shopping experiences (Brakus et al. 2009, Rampl et al. 2014). Similarly, companies have started to organize recruitment games and events (see the three examples in **Figure 2**).

Holistic Perspective: Focus on Organizational Attractiveness

The prior section discussed employer image measures of singular attributes that job seekers associate with employer image. Complementing this elementalistic perspective, some researchers have adopted a more holistic view. Collins & Stevens (2002) posited that associations regarding an employer could be broken down in both perceived attributes and attitudes. Whereas the perceived attributes adhere to the elementalistic perspective, Collins & Stevens defined attitudes as “general positive feelings that job seekers hold toward an organization” (see also DeVecchio et al. 2007). Collins & Stevens argued that these associations are more automatic and thus referred to them as “surface” employer image associations.

From a conceptual point of view, it is important to highlight that this holistic perspective does not conceptualize employer image as consisting of a set of specific mental representations and knowledge structures because it focuses on general feelings and attitudes toward the organization (Gardner et al. 2011). That is also the reason why Collins & Kanar (2013) equate these surface employer image associations with organizational attractiveness. In most studies that adopted this holistic aggregated perspective, company employment image (in that case operationalized as a measure of overall organizational attractiveness; see Highhouse et al. 2003) served as a dependent variable, whereas the measures of singular attributes (see above) were typically used as independent variables (see Summary Point 2).

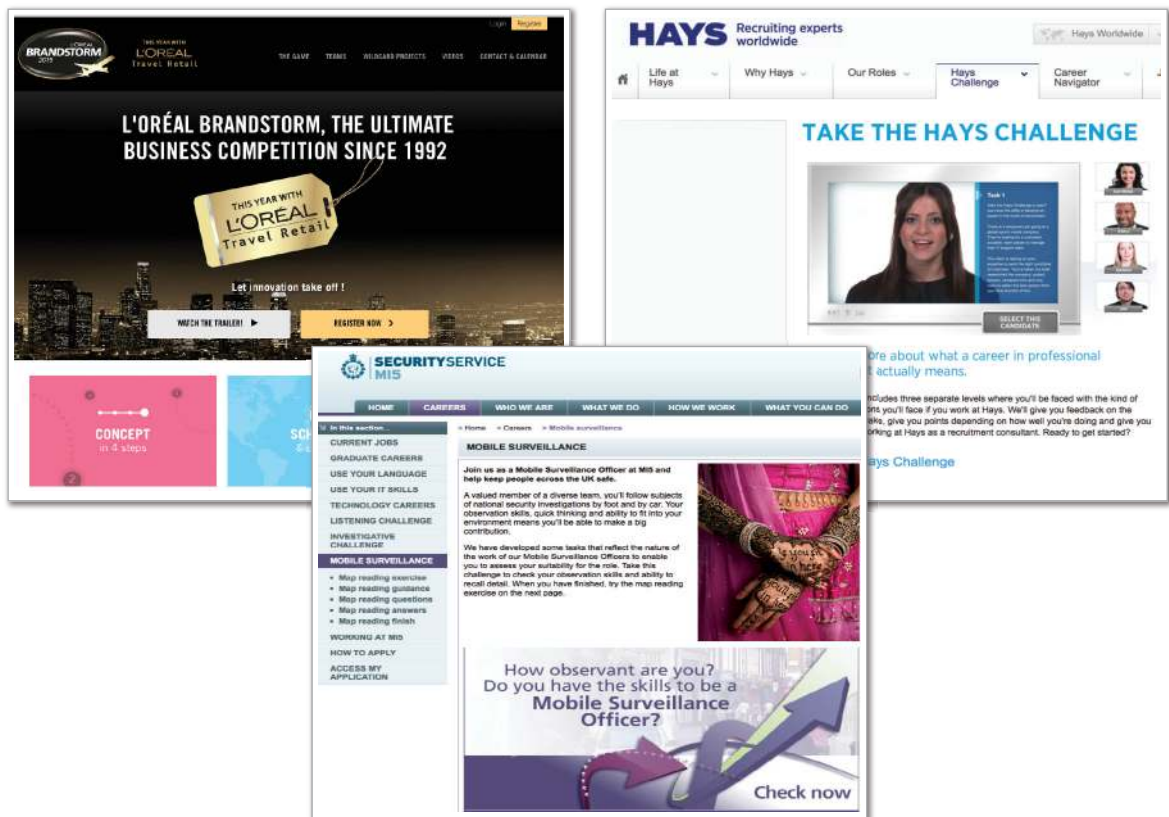


Figure 2

Examples of websites with recruitment games and events. (left) <http://www.brandstorm.loreal.com/>; (right) http://salaryguide.hays.co.uk/hc/html5_challenge/index.html; (bottom) <https://careers.mi5.gov.uk/opportunities/intelligence-collection>.

OUTCOMES OF EMPLOYER IMAGE

In the marketing literature, brand equity refers to the incremental value related to a strong brand due only to the brand's name and associations (Keller 1993). This added value is then evidenced in a manifold of positive effects on decision making, emotions, purchase behavior, differentiation relative to competing products, and loyalty. In this section, we review research that has tested whether these positive consequences associated with brands in the marketing literature also translate to organizations with strong employer brands. We review these outcomes prior to the research on the antecedents, moderators, and mediators, given the need to answer the following questions: Why is it important to study employer image in the first place? Why does it matter?

Decision Making Benefits

A first strand of research examined whether applicants' decision making differs for organizations with strong brands versus those with weaker brands. Cable & Turban (2003) showed that applicants had a better memory of recruitment materials from organizations with a strong employer brand. Recently, Rampl et al. (2014) used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to demonstrate

that decision making with regard to strong brands (first-choice brands) was accompanied by decreased brain activation linked to reasoning and working memory, suggesting less information processing demands. Although these studies confirm the decision making advantages of stronger brands, Brooks et al. (2003) discovered that organizations with a strong reputation were not consistently associated with a large number of positive associations only; rather, being more familiar with a company provided a larger pool of both positive and negative associations about that company.

Prehire and Posthire Outcomes

A second stream of studies found that these decision making advantages influenced the applicant's preferences and translated into stronger job pursuit intentions and prehire choices at each touch point with the organization (e.g., Cable & Turban 2003, Slaughter et al. 2004); that is, impressions of an organization measured early in recruitment strongly predict applicants' attraction measured in later recruitment stages, and these are related to applicants' final job acceptance decisions. Cable & Turban (2003) also found that people would accept 7% lower pay to work at an organization with a strong image (see also DeVecchio et al. 2007), which confirms the effect of people willing to pay a price premium for consumer brands. So, at the organizational level, it comes as no surprise that organizations with a good image are able to attract more and better applicants (e.g., Collins & Han 2004, Turban & Cable 2003).

Differentiation

A third stream of studies found that, in the marketing domain, brands can lead to improved differentiation of a product vis-à-vis its competitors. So far, only one study in the recruitment field has tested this effect. In the banking industry, Lievens & Highhouse (2003) showed that symbolic attributes (e.g., innovativeness) rather than instrumental attributes served as points of differentiation. More research is needed to confirm this pattern in other industries.

Emotional Bond

A fourth strand of research has examined whether employer brands create emotional connections with applicants. Rampl et al.'s (2014) fMRI study confirmed that choosing strong brands led to increased brain activation linked to emotions. Also, Rampl & Kenning (2014) found that brand affect and trust mediated the effect of symbolic trait inferences on organizational attractiveness of potential applicants. Interestingly, trait inferences were also differentially related to brand affect and trust. Sincerity was related to both employer brand trust and affect, but excitement, sophistication, and ruggedness were related to only affect. Other studies extended these findings of strong brands creating emotional bonds to posthire effects once people worked in the organization. Davies (2008) surveyed commercial managers in 16 organizations and found that trait inferences were associated with satisfaction and loyalty. As such, the emotional power of employer image seems to be confirmed for prehire and posthire recruitment outcomes.

It would be interesting to examine the commonalities and differences between trait inferences and traditional drivers of job and organizational attitudes. For example, Lievens et al. (2007) integrated employer image and organizational identity by testing whether the instrumental-symbolic framework was also useful for conceptualizing the dimensions underlying identity. Both sets of attributes explained substantial variance in image (among actual applicants) and identity (among employees), although the importance of the specific instrumental and symbolic attributes differed.

Return on Investment

Finally, there is evidence that an attractive workplace image pays off in better organizational performance. Fulmer et al. (2003) found that organizations on the Best Companies to Work For list enjoyed superior organizational performance advantages over the broad market of publicly traded firms and a matched sample of US firms. This research is important because, to our knowledge, this is the only carefully conducted study that linked employer image to hard economic outcomes (see Summary Point 3).

ANTECEDENTS (FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT) OF EMPLOYER IMAGE

In this section, we review research on the formation and development of employer image. Early work in this area suggested that image perceptions could come from virtually any experience a person had with an organization or anything they had heard from other people. For example, Cable & Turban (2001, p. 132) noted the following:

[A] brand equity perspective implies that the recruitment literature must look beyond recruitment interventions as the sole source of job seekers' employer knowledge. *Any information source*, ranging from company's brand advertisement to friends' word of mouth (WOM), has the potential to affect job seekers' employer knowledge" (italics added for emphasis).

To the casual observer, such statements may seem like cop-outs. Suggesting that almost anything can influence employer image perceptions about organizations seems to absolve researchers from the responsibility of trying to understand how specific forces operate. Fortunately, this has not been the case because considerable empirical research has sought to understand influences on employer image beliefs. In fact, several relatively disconnected empirical pieces on the formation of image perceptions currently exist. Highhouse and colleagues (Highhouse et al. 1999, 2009; Highhouse & Hoffman 2001) have written about the development of different kinds of images, including recruitment image, financial image, market image, and corporate social responsibility (CSR). In addition, there have been theoretical discussions on the origin of (potential) applicants' perceptions of organizational image (e.g., Cable & Turban 2001, Slaughter et al. 2004).

In the remainder of this section, we discuss three categories of influences on organizational image beliefs: organizational actions and characteristics, information about organizations disseminated by the organization (such as advertisements, web pages, and recruiters), and information disseminated by nonorganizational sources.

ORGANIZATIONAL ACTIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS (OUTSIDE OF THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS)

Highhouse et al. (2009) proposed that several organizational cues might affect images of the organization in the minds of constituents.³ Two of these categories of organizational cues were substantive organizational investments and symbolic organizational investments. Substantive investments included actions such as investing in human capital, product development, and diversification, whereas symbolic investments denoted actions such as (general) advertising, public relations, and CSR policies.

³Although the authors primarily were concerned with the shared images held by knowledgeable constituents (defined as reputation), such cues are just as likely to affect the images held by individual constituents.

In terms of organizational investments, empirical research is, for the most part, actually relatively sparse. In one of the earliest studies of firm-level predictors of corporate reputation, Fombrun & Shanley (1990) found that corporate reputation (*Fortune* ratings) was positively predicted by firm profitability ($r = 0.44$), advertising ($r = 0.27$), organization size ($r = 0.22$), and market-to-book ratio ($r = 0.49$), and negatively predicted by diversification ($r = -0.24$). Additional evidence comes from various case studies by Petkova et al. (2008). They studied the development of reputations among 23 new ventures (NVs) and measured reputation by local newspaper articles and interviews with NV founders. Investment in product development contributed to the reputation of 8 of the 23 firms; investment in human capital contributed in 12 of the 23 firms; social capital investments, in 14 of the 23; and symbolic activities, in 8 of the 23. More empirical research is needed to understand the contribution of these investments to image perceptions and eventually to organization performance.

Research on the influence of CSR has exploded over the past two decades (e.g., Hatch & Schultz 2002, Jones et al. 2014, Sen & Bhattacharya 2001, Turban & Greening 1997). Generally, the degree to which a company is perceived as socially responsible is seen as positive by organizational members, applicants, and consumers. One interesting recent study (Jones et al. 2014) tested two dimensions of CSR (giving back to the community and proenvironment practices) and found that, compared to organizations where no CSR information was provided, those having either of these two sets of practices led to greater anticipated treatment as an employee and more anticipated pride from working at the organization. These image perceptions, in turn, influenced reports of organizational attractiveness.

Research on the connection between organizational activities and characteristics and image perceptions is still in its infancy. Most of the scholarly work that is relevant to “what organizations do” and “what organizations are” has focused on outcomes other than individual perceptions of image, such as reputation. However, a focus only on reputation (the general public’s shared perceptions) overlooks individual idiosyncrasies. To illustrate, depending on the level of congruence between organizational policies and a consumer’s own attitudes, CSR initiatives can actually reduce consumption of an organization’s products (Sen & Bhattacharya 2001).

Information Disseminated by Organizational and Non-Organizational Sources

A number of organizational and non-organizational sources provide organizational image information to job seekers. Below, we review the research on the impact of these different sources of information.

Organizational sources: job advertisements and web pages. There is a long history studying the influence of job ads on organizational attraction and job pursuit intentions. Several different ad characteristics have been studied, including message source (focusing mostly on whether the information comes from the company or a company-independent source), message content (including job characteristics, organizational policies, the specificity of the content, the number of available jobs, how much information is included, and the aesthetics of the advertisement), and the communication medium (e.g., web-based versus print). Walker & Hinojosa (2013) have provided a comprehensive review of the role of ads in recruitment; we refer readers to this paper for more details.

We do discuss some recent studies on job ads and attractiveness/application behavior. For example, Walker et al. (2008) found that the organizational attraction of more experienced job seekers was more strongly influenced by job-advertisement quality and less strongly influenced by negative peripheral cues than less experienced job seekers. Cromheecke et al. (2013) manipulated

the “strangeness” of recruitment ads by sending the ad via either email or a handwritten postcard. Postcards led to higher levels of application behavior and applicant pools with higher-quality applicants. Finally, Dineen & Williamson (2012) found that job postings with a screening-oriented focus (i.e., with detailed information about required qualifications that would allow unqualified applicants to self-select out) led to significantly higher-quality applicant pools.

Although most studies focused on holistic image (organizational attractiveness) and/or application behavior by applicants, there are also just a few studies examining effects of ads on specific elements of organizational image. For example, Highhouse et al. (1998) examined the use of scarcity language and found that when openings were described as scarce (versus plentiful), respondents perceived that the job paid more and employees were more loyal and committed.

A growing area of research tackles the effect of, in addition to job ads, organizational websites on image perceptions and applicant attraction (e.g., Allen et al. 2007, Dineen et al. 2002, Williamson et al. 2010). This makes sense because an organization’s website is the first place people go to learn about it (Cappelli 2001). Given space limitations, our review of the website/image research is necessarily selective. The most general conclusion is that both job/organization content and aesthetics are important (of course), but that it is not clear which one is of greater importance. For example, Allen et al. (2013) found in a verbal protocol analysis study that people made more verbal references to job content information; however, in a study with real web pages, design and communication features explained greater variance in image than job-opening information. In addition, Williamson et al. (2010) found a three-way interaction among website vividness (i.e., more graphics and less text), amount of job and company information, and firm reputation, such that when reputation was high and vividness was also high, the amount of job information had no effect on applicant attraction. This result, in combination with other studies showing that website aesthetics can have stronger effects than job attribute information on organizational image (Lyons & Marler 2011), suggests that it is possible to pay too much attention to media richness, website aesthetics, vividness, etc., because this can “crowd out” the pertinent information about the job and organization. If we think about the purpose of recruitment from the standpoint of productivity and person–organization (PO) fit, it is best for all parties that candidates make their choices about organizations on the basis of instrumental and symbolic attributes, as opposed to features of websites that may be poor signals of what it is like to work for a company.

Another interesting conclusion is that organizations must also be concerned with “laying it on too thick” or they risk being inundated with unqualified applicants who would not fit well with the organization’s culture (Dineen et al. 2007). Organizations promote their cultures through their websites (Braddy et al. 2006), but the site might attract too many applications, depending on the popularity of the culture. Thus, organizations might consider a website that provides customized fit information to job applicants and let those who would not fit self-select out (e.g., Williamson et al. 2003).

Recruiters as organizational sources. Much early recruitment research focused on the effects of recruiters on general organizational attractiveness or holistic image. Much of this early research reflected somewhat of a contest, in which one sought to determine whether job/organization attributes or recruiters explain more variance in applicants’ perceptions and behaviors. Although attributes won this contest, recruiters can still have a substantial effect on applicants’ perceptions of organizations and job pursuit intentions (Rynes et al. 1991). Interestingly, since the turn of the millennium, perhaps as a result of all of the earlier contest research, there has been far less research on recruiters. For example, in Connerley’s (2013) recent review, only approximately 10% of the studies on recruiter effects were published after 2000. Hence, it seems best to begin with Chapman et al.’s (2005) meta-analysis of predictors of organizational attraction. Chapman et al.

found that recruiter behaviors (personableness, competence, informativeness, and trustworthiness) are important for holistic image. Conversely, recruiter demographics (recruiter gender) and organizational function did not relate to image.

Since Chapman et al. (2005), only a few studies have examined recruiter behavior. Saks & Uggerslev (2010) manipulated recruiter behavior (personable/informative versus impersonal/uninformative) along with other characteristics of recruitment factors at multiple recruitment stages. Personable/informative recruiters had a positive effect at the recruitment interview phase but a negative effect at the site visit. The authors suggested savvy applicants might believe that recruiters are paid to persuade them to be interested in the company rather than actually giving them a sense of what the organization is really like. Another study (Boswell et al. 2003) used a longitudinal, structured interview methodology for exploring factors that led to acceptance or rejection of job offers and positive versus negative impressions of the company. More than half of the participants mentioned the positive effect of opportunity to meet with specific people (not only recruiters, but also people working in positions they had applied for, and those with high status). In terms of factors with negative effects, 41% mentioned interviewer behaviors (being disorganized, uninformed), and 25% mentioned interviewer attitudes (being cocky, condescending, or disinterested). This study is interesting, because the findings support the importance of using alternative methodologies for uncovering the effects of specific behaviors not captured by our traditional personableness, competence, and informativeness measures.

Moreover, these two studies point to some potentially interesting gaps in our knowledge. First, depending on the recruitment stage, applicants might have different expectations about what recruiters do and what their purpose is. Researchers should seek to understand applicants' expectations about recruiters' roles, and specifically the degree to which they see their interactions with recruiters as a persuasion situation. Second, these studies point out the need to continue studying recruiter effects in conjunction with other recruitment factors, because it is important to understand how shortcomings in one area of recruitment can be compensated for by other factors. For example, Saks & Uggerslev (2010) found that getting to interact with important people during the site visit was particularly impactful for influencing perceptions of fair treatment when people were faced with an impersonal and uninformative recruiter.

Nonorganizational sources: word of mouth and media. WOM is defined as an interpersonal communication, independent of an organization's direct marketing activities, about an organization and its products, and about what it is like to work there (Bone 1995, Van Hove & Lievens 2009). Whereas in the past WOM was typically exchanged in actual social interactions, it now occurs often via social media (aka, "word of mouse," Van Hove & Lievens 2007). WOM is a social, company-independent information source from people who have no self-interest in promoting the organization or its products (Van Hove & Lievens 2009). The field of marketing had long been aware of how people influence one another in purchasing consumer products (e.g., Keller 1993). Similarly, WOM might have a major impact in recruitment because people often have limited and ambiguous information about organizations, and this leaves room to influence their decisions, especially if that information is highly detailed (Van Hove 2013).

WOM is related to organizational image, as well as applicant intentions and behavior (Collins & Stevens 2002). In addition, WOM relates to general image more strongly than other company-dependent sources such as publicity, sponsorship, and advertising (Collins & Stevens 2002), and it explains variance in image perceptions above and beyond these company-sponsored activities (Van Hove & Lievens 2009). This is probably because the company-independent nature of WOM makes it more credible (Van Hove 2013). A conclusion we can take from the findings on WOM, therefore, is that it does matter and that organizational decision makers should try to understand

what is being said (or written) about their company by current and former organizational members (Keeling et al. 2013), as well as faculty and staff members at the universities where they recruit (Collins & Stevens 2002).

Although positively-valenced WOM seems to be influential in most studies, the findings on negative WOM, whereby effects are stronger in lab settings and weaker (or null) in field settings, are more mixed (Van Hoye 2013; see also Kanar et al. 2010, Van Hoye & Lievens 2007). Sorting out these findings is an important future research topic. For example, as in field settings people often know a great deal about an organization, they may have access to both positive and negative (WOM) information, and these two types of information may offset one another (e.g., Brooks et al. 2003). In addition, one must study whether salient, strongly-negative WOM has a negative effect on holistic image after mostly positive recruitment experiences. Van Hoye (2013) suggested that the weak effects of negative WOM in field settings might be due to the fact that most firms studied in the field already have positive images that are unlikely to be shaken by a negative WOM incident. However, we suspect that another reason is due to WOM measurement in field settings. For example, Van Hoye & Lievens (2009) used two items for measuring negative WOM, in which job seekers estimated how much time (no time at all to very much time) they spent talking to people who told them negative things and inquiring of family, friends, and acquaintances who advised against the employer. An important issue is just how negative those recommendations are and what exactly was said. Moreover, WOM research has focused almost exclusively on holistic image perceptions. Specific WOM experiences might have differential effects on various specific elemental images.

In the applied world, organizational decision makers are quite interested in how they are performing on social media (i.e., WOM) and understanding how customers, job seekers, and the general public perceive their organizations. Social media are ubiquitous; Twitter alone has 230 million active users; there are more than 100 million blogs, and Facebook recently surpassed 1 billion users (Kohli et al. 2015). On social media, people discuss virtually every imaginable topic, including organizations. There are also social media sites that are at least partially dedicated to discussions about companies, such as Glassdoor, Vault (Figure 3), and LinkedIn. Thus, conventional wisdom suggests that social media information and WOM affect employer images.

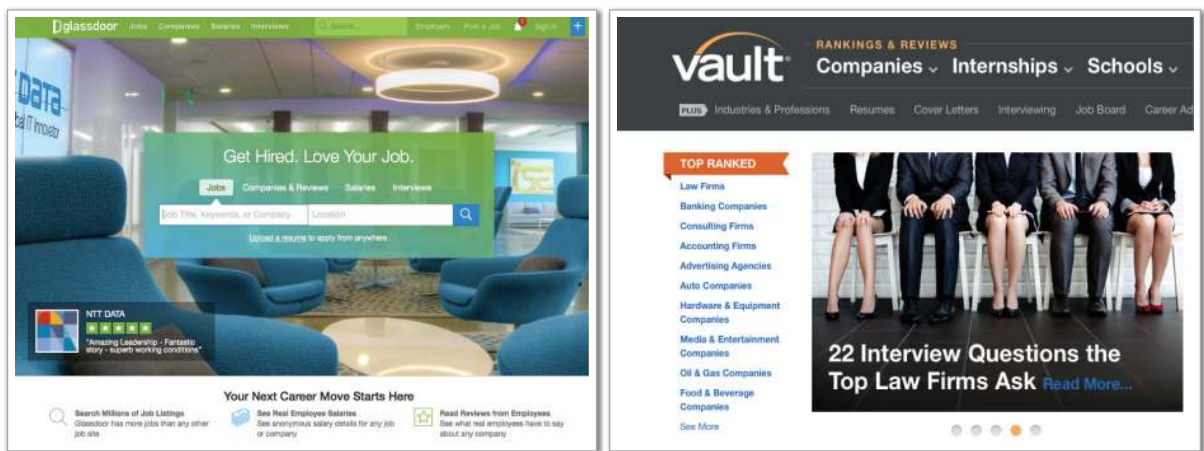


Figure 3

Examples of social media sites with word-of-mouth information about companies. (left) <http://www.glassdoor.com/index.htm>; (right) <http://www.vault.com/>.

However, this is an area where research lags far behind practice. We were able to locate just a handful of empirical studies that addressed the influence of these sites, and even these papers were quite general in how social networking sites influence image perceptions. For example, Sivertzen et al. (2013) found that undergraduate students' perceptions of organizations' social media presence were related to reputation perceptions, which in turn were related to intentions to apply for a job. However, counter to the authors' hypotheses, perceptions of social media use did not moderate the relation between reputation and application intentions. In an unpublished study, Rienties et al. (2012) found that undergraduate students were approximately twice more likely to be members of LinkedIn than Facebook but that much more job information was received through LinkedIn. Despite the paucity of empirical research on the topic, several authors have proposed the importance of studying this area of research (e.g., Bondarouk et al. 2013), and we agree. There are many potentially interesting topics here, and several stem from the idea that organizations are probably to some degree losing control over their own image and branding (Kohli et al. 2015, McFarland & Ployhart 2015). For example, it would be interesting to know to what degree image and branding concerns drive policies and managerial training related toward treatment of employees—with the idea that employees help to drive employer image through their postings on Vault and Glassdoor. A relevant finding here is one by Lievens et al. (2007), which shows that people inside the Belgian army had markedly lower opinions of the organization than did recruits. Potential concerns about generalizability notwithstanding, this finding suggests that social media websites—especially those where employees review the companies they work for—may be creating poorer images in the minds of job seekers. We see the relation between social media and image as a wide open area for future research.

Apart from WOM, one area still not covered in this section is mass media (newspaper articles, television, and radio news). The difficulty in assessing effects of mass media on image is that such work is necessarily correlational, where researchers assess both image and the degree to which information was received from mass media sources; however, temporal precedence cannot be established (e.g., Fombrun & Shanley 1990, Gatewood et al. 1993, Slaughter et al. 2014, Slaughter & Li 2006). Interestingly, Fombrun & Shanley found that, when controlling for organizational size, greater media exposure actually led to a worse reputation. They attributed this result to media scrutiny and negative coverage of these firms. In a study of a single military organization, Slaughter et al. (2014) found that exposure to that organization via the news and on television was significantly related to perceptions of the organization as trustworthy, and as one that would help build recruits' job-related skills and leadership skills. (r ranged from 0.12 to 0.20.) Slaughter & Li (2006) discovered further that people who had similar experiences with the media regarding an organization had stronger agreement about an organization's image. In addition to the lack of evidence for causal direction, another limitation of the studies by Slaughter and colleagues was that they collected data only on the amount of information respondents collected from these sources and not on the content or valence of the information.

Another aspect related to mass media is the presentation of Best Places to Work rankings in popular business magazines (Love & Singh 2011, Joo & McLean 2006). As Love & Singh (2011) note, "workplace branding" via Great Place to Work lists has so far garnered much more attention among practitioners than among academics. Love & Singh examined the types of HR practices associated with appearance on this list, which included inspired leadership, strategic HR practices, open communication, and formal performance management with goal setting, among others. In an unpublished report, Douglas (2007) found that companies who appeared on such lists produced larger pools of applicants. However, our review did not reveal any studies that examined specific images that are held by applicants when they know that a company is on one of these lists. In

the future, experimental work could be done with possible research questions such as: What are the effects of (a) appearance on the list of best places to work and (b) ranking on this list (e.g., #1, #50, #100) on (potential) applicants' perceptions of organizations' instrumental and symbolic attributes?

Along these lines, one additional study bears mentioning. In the only experimental study that we are aware of that has tested the effects of mass media on perceptions of image, Slaughter et al. (2004, study 3) wrote simulated newspaper articles whose content described a fictitious clothing store as being high on one of five organization personality dimensions. The manipulation of the articles' content had the expected effects; for example, the Innovativeness articles led to higher ratings on the Innovativeness scale than did the other four articles, and higher ratings on Innovativeness than on the other four dimensions. Although the scenario is clearly a contrived one, it suggests that job seekers' images of organizations can be affected by the news media.

MECHANISMS EXPLAINING IMAGE EFFECTS

The theories that are used to explain the effects of employer image on outcomes are numerous. In our observation, those invoked most often include signaling theory (Spence 1973), social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael 1989), and the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo 1986). The underlying idea behind signaling theory as it applies to effects of image in recruitment is that job seekers use the (limited) information available from image characteristics (e.g., CSR, financial success, competent recruiters, appearance on list of Best Places To Work) as signals of what it might be like to work there. Social identity theory considerations are based on the idea that people define themselves in terms of the organization of which they are members (Ashforth & Mael 1989, Dutton et al. 1994) and thus pay close attention to their impressions of organizations and how organizational characteristics might reflect on them if they were to join a particular firm (Highhouse et al. 2007). The ELM emphasizes the difference between the central and peripheral routes to persuasion, which reflect how carefully people process information about recruiting organizations when they receive the information and what determines the route down which information travels (Cable & Turban 2001). We refer the interested reader to Ehrhart & Ziegert (2005) for a more in-depth discussion of theories used in organizational attraction research in general.

As a key conclusion, our review of papers on employer image suggests that these theoretical mechanisms are often used to frame or justify hypotheses but the actual mediators are typically not tested directly. For example, Roberson et al. (2005) used ELM to hypothesize that more detailed (specific) recruitment messages would lead to more favorable impressions of organizations, stronger PO fit, and attraction, but did not measure the mechanism indicative of central route (i.e., deeper) processing of information. As another example, Turban & Greening (1997) used both signaling and social identity theory to hypothesize positive effects of firms' CSR practices on reputation and organizational attraction but did not test job seeker inferences from CSR signals or perceptions of social identity. Signaling theory seems to have been particularly overused and misapplied, as noted by Highhouse et al. (2007, p. 136):

In her influential review of the literature on organizational attraction, Rynes (1991) briefly commented that characteristics of the recruitment episode often serve as signals of unknown attributes. . . unfortunately, subsequent researchers have coined the term 'signaling theory' to refer to any instance in which prospective applicants make inferences about unknown organizational characteristics.

Frankly, we do not think that using theories as justification without directly testing them is a concern specific to the employer image domain, and we ourselves are definitely also guilty of this practice. However, we do believe that the field would be better served with direct tests of mechanisms implied by theories used to justify hypotheses in empirical papers. Fortunately, there are exemplars to which we can point where these types of improvements have been implemented. Let's take again signaling theory as an example. To understand whether job/organizational characteristics made known during recruitment are actually used by job seekers as signals of unobservable organizational characteristics, Highhouse et al. (2007) and others (Ehrhart & Ziegert 2005, Highhouse & Hoffman 2001) have suggested that one should focus on the inferences made by job seekers. For example, a market signal such as being placed on *Fortune's* Best Companies to Work For list might lead job seekers to infer that a company is trustworthy, fair, and empathic, and thus a respectable company (Highhouse et al. 2007).

Jones et al.'s (2014) recent paper serves as an excellent example of following up on these recommendations. As noted above, Jones et al. hypothesized that the relationship between CSP and organizational attractiveness could be explained by three signal-based mechanisms: anticipated pride from organizational entry, expected treatment by the organization, and perceived value fit with the organization. They tested two different dimensions of CSP (procommunity and proenvironment) in both the lab (with fictitious company web pages) and the field (career fair). In the lab study, procommunity and proenvironment messages affected attraction through anticipated pride and perceived value fit, but not expected treatment. In the field study, procommunity messages' effects were indirect through the proposed mediators, whereas proenvironment effects were only direct. (The mediating hypotheses were not supported.) We applaud Jones et al. for studying not only the "what" (CSP positively impacts organizational attraction) but also the "why" (through expected treatment and perceived value fit). In another interesting study, DelVecchio et al. (2007) compared the signals perceived from identical offers from companies representing strong versus weak brands (e.g., Jack Daniel's versus Old Forrester). Job seekers saw strong brands as helpful for building résumés and job-related skills, and these inferences led them to be more likely to accept offers from companies with strong brands and to require lower salaries to work there (see Summary Point 5).

MODERATORS OF EMPLOYER IMAGE-RECRUITMENT OUTCOME RELATIONSHIPS

As we have discussed above, various dimensions of employer image have been related to key recruitment outcomes that matter to organizations. Some scholars have suggested, however, that individual differences might play a part in the relationship between image perceptions and recruitment outcomes. In this section, we selectively review research examining how characteristics of the person and of the sample/subgroup moderate image-recruitment outcome relationships. We also examine the literature on temporal and cross-cultural moderators.

Individual Difference Moderators

The studies on individual difference moderators of the image-recruitment outcome relationship grew from historical traditions and proliferated after 2001 (e.g., Behling et al. 1968, Tom 1971, Turban & Keon 1993). Behling et al. (1968) outlined three organizational choice process theories, one of which was Subjective Factor Theory, which "emphasized the congruence between personality patterns and the 'image' of the firm as the major determinant of organizational choice" (Tom 1971, p. 575). Tom tested this theory by asking college job seekers to rate themselves and their

most/least preferred organization; he found support for the hypothesis of a stronger correspondence between self-ratings and rating of the most preferred organization (as compared to the least preferred organization). Turban & Keon did not study image (perceptions) per se because they manipulated elementalistic organizational image characteristics such as reward structure, management centralization, organizational size, and geographical dispersion. Self-esteem and need for achievement interacted with these organizational characteristics to influence attraction (e.g., lower self-esteem participants were more attracted to more decentralized organizations).

This interactional and PO fit perspective on organizational attraction, combined with the work of Turban & Keon (1993) and the proliferation of organizational image frameworks, invoked various studies examining interactions between job seekers' individual differences and elemental image dimensions affecting holistic image or other recruitment outcomes (e.g., Behrend et al. 2009, Schreurs et al. 2009, Slaughter & Greguras 2009). The methodology for variable selection in the majority of these investigations could be categorized as either cherry picking or shotgun. In cherry picking studies, such as the work by Behrend et al. (2009), scholars chose a single image dimension (presence versus lack of proenvironment message) and a single individual difference (environmental stance) and looked for interactions between the two. In the shotgun methodology (e.g., Slaughter & Greguras and Schreurs et al.), authors chose all dimensions of a particular framework and generated all possible hypotheses about interactions with variables in a particular individual-difference framework (e.g., the Big Five). Unfortunately, these types of studies generally have not been met with much success. For example, data from Slaughter & Greguras supported only three of ten interaction hypotheses; in Schreurs et al., only two of six hypothesized interactions were significant.

Fortunately, recent research has been more strongly driven by overarching theoretical frameworks and finer-grained studies of individual differences, and this work has been more successful in contributing to our knowledge of how individual differences moderate image effects (e.g., DeArmond & Crawford 2011, Kausel & Slaughter 2011, Yu 2014). For example, DeArmond & Crawford (2011) used Highhouse et al.'s (2007) social identity theory of attraction to organizations as their overarching framework. They used this framework to hypothesize that the relation between organization personality perceptions and attraction would be stronger among those with higher levels of concern for value expression and social adjustment. They found general support for the value expression hypotheses, but not for the social adjustment hypotheses. In another recent study, Kausel & Slaughter (2011) pointed out that the organization personality dimensions might be too narrow to map on the Big Five, and proposed it would be more appropriate to study the narrow facets of some Big Five characteristics (e.g., Trust under Agreeableness; Assertiveness under Extraversion) as moderators of the organization personality-attraction link. In addition, they pitted supplementary explanations (e.g., Trustworthiness being more important to those higher on trait Trust) against complementarity explanations (e.g., Trustworthiness being more important to those lower on trait Trust) for these moderator effects. Results showed that (a) narrow facets but not broad domains interacted with organization personality perceptions and (b) the complementarity but not the supplementary perspective was supported. We recommend future studies to adopt such theory-driven approaches (with a focus on the "why") over shotgun or cherry picking methods.

Sample/Subgroup Moderators

In this section, we discuss research that examined demographic groups' (e.g., groups of different ages or ethnicities) differences in attention to and use of image variables, as well as work on differences between employment groups (e.g., potential applicants, applicants, and employees).

Such research has served to advance our understanding of what will be helpful for attracting specific groups of employees, as well as how people's perspectives on image change as they accumulate experience with the firm.

Research shows clearly that the image variable that is the strongest predictor of racial differences in attraction is the degree to which the organization values diversity (Avery & McKay 2006). This message can be transmitted to applicants in several different ways, including explicit statements in brochures and on websites, graphical depiction of employees of different races, and having minority recruiters available to meet with applicants. For example, studies have shown that black individuals react more favorably to diversity statements than do white individuals (see, however, Williams & Bauer 1994), and that black individuals react more favorably to identity-conscious compared to identity-blind selection processes (e.g., Highhouse et al. 1999). Pictorial diversity research has provided two conclusions: First, women and members of minority groups react favorably to pictorial diversity in ads and brochures (e.g., Avery 2003); second, this practice is commonplace (e.g., Cober et al. 2003). Thus, it is probably most appropriate to say that organizations are "dinged" by minorities if their ads do not show evidence of diversity. The research on diversity of recruiters has generally supported hypothesized positive effects of utilizing racially diverse recruiters (e.g., Thomas & Wise 1999). An interesting theoretical paper by Avery & McKay (2006) suggested that the demographic diversity effect demonstrated during the site visit might differentially affect minority versus white applicants and that this also might depend on their levels of racioethnic identity, social dominance orientation, and other-group orientation. All of this suggests that subsample moderation based on race might be more complex than research has shown.

There are some other "assorted" interesting findings from studies that look at race as a moderator. For example, Newman & Lyon (2009) found that describing a company as innovative strongly increased the likelihood of applying among more conscientious black applicants but not more conscientious white applicants. Kim & Gelfand (2003) found that ethnic identity (the degree to which applicants strongly identify with their race) moderated the relationship between "valuing diversity" statements in a recruitment brochure and perceptions of treatment of employees; however, this finding was not dependent on whether participants were Caucasian, Black, Asian, or Latino. Similarly, Walker et al. (2012) found that both black and white participants spent more time viewing websites and recalled more information from those sites when they contained cues about diversity. However, this relationship was mediated by perceptions of organizational attractiveness for only black individuals.

In terms of age moderators, some earlier work by Highhouse et al. (1999) focused on how people from two extreme groups on age, teenagers and retirees, viewed fast-food companies on 15 dimensions of elemental image (e.g., customers) and one holistic dimension (general company employment image). Somewhat surprisingly, the relations between elemental and holistic image were remarkably similar for the two groups, with differences surfacing on only two of the 15 dimensions. Retirees placed more importance on related experiences and task demands. Also relevant here is recent research showing that work values differ across generations (Twenge et al. 2010). This work showed that, compared to college students sampled in 1976, those sampled in 2006 placed stronger value on leisure and extrinsic rewards and lower value on intrinsic and social rewards. Leaving aside the social commentary one could make on generational differences, this suggests that playing up leisure and extrinsic rewards might improve companies' images in the minds of young recruits.

As far as gender is concerned, research shows that identification with gender positively moderates the relationship between organizational gender composition and holistic image, but only for women (Martin & Parsons 2007). However, Chapman et al.'s (2005) meta-analysis showed, overall, somewhat weak evidence for sample-level gender-based moderators of the

relationship between organizational characteristics and organizational attraction (holistic image). Women placed more importance on job characteristics and less importance on organizational justice perceptions than did men, but there were no gender differences for nine other categories of predictors they examined. The gender differences for job attribute preferences are consistent with Konrad et al.'s (2000) meta-analysis, which finds small (most $d < 0.20$) albeit significant gender differences in preferences for job attributes. These differences make sense given fairly different role expectations for men and women (Wiersma 1990), especially as they relate to responsibilities outside of work. As men's and women's roles in and outside of work have changed somewhat, it would be interesting to reopen the study of gender differences in image importance.

Although most research in this area has considered the importance of image for affecting recruitment outcomes with (potential) applicants, one must recognize that company image (identity) can affect current employees, in terms of pride, satisfaction, performance, and retention (e.g., Lievens 2007, Lievens et al. 2007). Several studies have focused only on current employees (e.g., Davies 2008, King & Grace 2008). For example, in King & Grace, employees in service organizations that perceived the environment to be open and honest, and allowed for a lot of dissemination of information, were more convinced of and committed to the company's brand (which resembles results in the organizational culture literature). Lievens and colleagues (Lievens 2007, Lievens et al. 2007) focused on comparisons among the different groups in terms of what they value. In the Belgian military, they found that the three groups (potential applicants, actual applicants, and current military employees) did not differ much with respect to their overall focus on symbolic image aspects, but actual applicants seemed to place more importance on instrumental image aspects, suggesting that they are more likely to focus on the tangible things that jobs offer.

Temporal Moderators

In the recruitment field, there have been longstanding calls for more longitudinal studies. Along these lines, a distinction has been made among three stages: generating applicants, maintaining applicant status, and influencing job choice. The domain of employer image is no exception to these calls. In this section, we review research about how these stages affect the importance of different image dimensions and their effects.

To shed light on the importance of temporal moderators, Uggerslev et al. (2012) conducted a meta-analysis in which they collapsed mostly cross-sectional studies to examine the role of several recruitment variables (e.g., recruiter variables, fit perceptions) in each of the three recruitment stages. Organizational characteristics (operationalized as organizational attributes and organizational image) were also analyzed. This group of organizational characteristics was especially important in the second stage of recruitment (i.e., maintaining applicant status). Among the organizational characteristics, image was more important than specific organizational attributes. Organizational characteristics did not play a role at the stage of influencing job choice. A recent study provides an explanation for why image seems to be of less importance in this last recruitment stage (Walker & Hinojosa 2013). This study examined how organizations can maintain applicants' interest after they apply for a job, by studying recruitment interactions (contact episodes) and their influence on job choice. In later stages applicants attached greater importance to personal contact episodes with organizational representatives as an uncertainty reduction mechanism.

Harold & Ployhart (2008) examined how job and organizational attributes were differentially weighted across recruitment stages. In their policy-capturing study, students were presented three times during the recruitment cycle (application, start of job offers, and postdecision) with hypothetical graduate school offers that varied specific attributes. Results showed that location and prestige remained constant determinants in choosing a job offer, whereas fit and pay received

more weight over time. In addition, candidates with more offers were more “picky” because they attached more importance to fit information over time (see Summary Point 6).

Cross-Cultural Moderators

For many years, recruitment research in general and employer image research in particular were mostly conducted in Anglo-Saxon countries. Recently, however, this has changed markedly because companies (especially multinationals or MNCs) are increasingly aware of the need to attract a broader, more global, and culturally diverse applicant pool. This also invokes questions of whether MNCs’ employment branding practices should be global (global brand) or customized to the countries (brand image customization).

In this section, we review studies that have tackled these issues in recent years. Notably, both theoretical and empirical progress has been made. At the theoretical level, Ma & Allen (2009) developed a framework of how cultural values influence effectiveness of recruitment practices in different cultures. Ma & Allen proposed that cultural values might affect attention to employer image attributes, which then affects further decisions in the recruitment cycle. There is also empirical research that has begun to test some of Ma & Allen’s propositions. Baum & Kabst (2013) examined whether the relationship between employer image attributes and application intentions varied among applicants in different countries. They surveyed undergraduate engineering students in Europe (Germany and Hungary) and the Asia-Pacific (China and India). Across these four countries, specific instrumental attributes such as work-life comfort, task attractiveness, and payment attractiveness were differentially valued. In a similar study, Caligiuri et al. (2010) surveyed engineering graduate students from nine countries and found support for the role of both cross-cultural values (i.e., collectivism) and individual differences (i.e., need for achievement and need for power) as moderators for the importance attached to a company’s reputation. Froese et al.’s (2010) study in Vietnam drew on the literature about so-called country of origin image (i.e., beliefs people hold about a particular country and the products from that country). Vietnamese students were attracted to both Japanese and US companies because of their good country of origin image, a key determinant of which was the belief that those two countries were technologically advanced. However, Vietnamese students rated in-group orientation significantly higher for Japanese companies than for US companies.

Although these studies have generated important initial insights into how cultural values might impact the importance of employer image dimensions, they also share an important limitation. In many studies, the effect of cultural values cannot be distinguished from other contextual factors. Examples of such factors are the economic, educational, social, and political situations of the countries involved. Apart from cultural values, countries might also differ greatly on these other contextual factors, which in turn affect the results obtained regarding the importance of employer image dimensions. Another limitation of the current research base is that few studies actually manipulated recruitment information to attract global travelers. A good example is a recent study by Phillips et al. (2014). They varied the global image of the organization by including or excluding in a job ad the need to travel worldwide. Even a small amount of such information was found to affect applicant attraction and job pursuit intentions (see Summary Point 7).

EMPLOYER IMAGE MANAGEMENT

Given the importance of employer image for recruitment outcomes, a natural question becomes: What can companies do to influence the images held by (potential) applicants? For example, in their recent review of the recruitment literature, Dineen & Soltis (2011, p. 49) noted that “research

is needed regarding how to affect or leverage a firm's reputation or image." Essentially, this covers the other side of the formation of company employment image because knowledge about factors that affect the development of company employment image might be used to design interventions for (re)shaping it.

Early work in this area focused on auditing, or firms trying to understand the images of their companies that job seekers hold. For example, Highhouse et al. (1999) laid out a five-step plan to identify the dimensions of company employment image and where a company stands relative to its competitors. These steps include the elicitation of image dimensions via a forced choice procedure, where participants are presented with pairs of companies in the same industry and asked why they would prefer to work at one place over another. Once the dimensions have been identified and measured, a focal company is benchmarked against its peers.

However, an audit is only a first step. Other studies have tried to determine how company images might be influenced, either directly or indirectly, by organizations. Such strategies include organizational sponsorship of university activities; strategic design of websites, job ads, recruitment media, and social media; hiring and training recruiters; careful consideration of site visits; and reducing the delay between when a candidate interviews and when an offer is made. Given space limitations, we selectively summarized some of the important and more unique studies in **Table 2**. This table presents the major strategy or tactic that was employed or tested, along with the usable findings and image management implications.

Some of the more interesting findings involve moderating relationships, because the effectiveness of strategies for managing brands and improving images is likely to be dependent on the type of organization and the specific job seekers an organization is trying to attract. Therefore, we call attention to some of Collins' classic studies in this area (Collins 2007, Collins & Han 2004, Collins & Stevens 2002). Collins and his colleagues found that the effectiveness of different practices depends on how familiar the organization is likely to be, due to its size, its existing reputation, and its general advertising. Low-involvement practices (e.g., sponsorship of university events) are more powerful for companies with weaker advertising and reputations; high-involvement practices (e.g., employee testimonials) are more powerful for companies with better existing reputations. Another interesting paper with moderating effects is a recent one by Slaughter et al. (2014). These authors showed that the effectiveness of classic recruiter characteristics such as warmth and competence had positive, linear effects on recruits' image beliefs when recruits' belief confidence was low (i.e., they had less information about the organization prior to the site visit). When belief confidence was high, these relationships were U-shaped and curvilinear—for recruits who were already familiar with the organization, it took better recruiters to have any effect on image beliefs. Decision makers should exercise some caution when considering implementing any practices on the basis of the outcomes of single studies. In line with evidence-based management, organizations are advised to look out for new practices, try them, evaluate them, and make changes on the basis of their evaluations.

In some cases, our review also hinted at strategies outside of the traditional recruitment and employer image literature. For example, in the world of retailing, where job seekers often walk in stores to apply for positions, organizational decision makers are often concerned about direct staff WOM. Along these lines, Keeling et al. (2013) recommended a strategy aimed at improving staff WOM, but these recommendations are relevant to managing image. The steps include researching formal and informal channels to find out what employees are saying and informing employees by equipping them with job-seeker-relevant information.

It may be difficult sometimes for an organization to see the big picture in terms of what it needs to do given its current employer image. To provide some guidance, we have created an evidence-based contingency table. In particular, **Table 3** makes a distinction between various scenarios in

Table 2 Selective overview of research findings and implications related to employer image management

Paper	Tactic(s) studied	Major finding(s)	Implication(s) for managing employer image
Allen et al. (2004)	Recruitment media: FTF versus video versus audio versus text	FTF communication is the strongest influence on two-way communication perceptions; the medium has little influence on other perceptions (e.g., amount of information, personal focus, social presence, symbolism). These perceptions have a moderate influence on medium credibility and satisfaction, which in turn influence recruitment outcomes.	Use recruitment media that provide personal focus, social presence (i.e., are sensitive, warm, and personal), and symbolism (i.e., evoke images in the mind of the job seeker).
Allen et al. (2007)	Website characteristics	The amount of job information and organizational information on websites influences attitudes toward the organization (holistic image) and employment intentions.	Use websites to provide the maximum amount of information about the organization and the job.
Becker et al. (2010)	Timing of job offers	Shorter delays between most recent contact with candidate and provision of job offer led to greater acceptance of offers, without any negative effects on performance or turnover.	Make faster offers to improve images held by recruits and to get them to accept offers.
Cable & Yu (2006)	Recruitment media	Career fairs were viewed as richer media and more credible than information on company websites and electronic bulletin boards. Richness and credibility predicted changes in company image dimensions.	Make sure the company has a presence at career fairs and clearly communicates its values.
Cober et al. (2003)	Website characteristics	Navigation usability of websites was much more important than website aesthetic in affecting image and recruitment outcomes.	Professionally develop and pilot test websites for navigation ease and usability prior to using them for recruitment purposes.
Collins & Han (2004)	Corporate advertising, sponsorship, general and detailed recruitment ads, employee endorsements	“It depends”—low-involvement recruitment practices are more effective for companies with less advertising and lower reputation; the opposite is true for companies with more advertising and more favorable reputations.	Tailor recruitment practices to the type of company you work for, because the same strategy does not work for all companies.
Collins & Stevens (2002)	Publicity, sponsorship, word of mouth, advertising	An important four-way interaction of all four practices on holistic image suggests a multiplicative effect.	When recruiting on college campuses, using a menu of strategies should be most effective in creating a positive company image.
Cromheecke et al. (2013)	Use of postcard to recruit applicants	Using a postcard led to more applicants than using an email.	“Dare to be different” by using recruitment media that other organizations are not.

(Continued)

Table 2 (Continued)

Paper	Tactic(s) studied	Major finding(s)	Implication(s) for managing employer image
Dineen et al. (2002)	Websites to communicate PO fit information	Applicants were told that they were a better fit for the company's reported stronger holistic image; this was somewhat dependent upon actual PO fit and applicant self-esteem.	Include PO fit assessments on websites, especially if the company culture is unique.
Dineen et al. (2007)	Websites to communicate PO fit information	When good aesthetics are present, PO fit information on websites serves to deter poor-fitting job seekers from applying.	Include PO fit assessments on websites, especially if the company culture is unique (especially if there are concerns about too many applications).
Dineen & Williamson (2012)	Screening orientation in websites	When companies have stronger reputations, they use their websites to screen employees. This leads to higher-quality applicant pools.	If there are concerns about too many applications given the organization's favorable image, use web-based screening to reduce pool quantity and increase pool quality.
Rienties et al. (2012)	Social media	Undergraduate students are more likely to be members of Facebook than LinkedIn, and this pattern is the opposite of that for managers and recruiters.	Make sure your firm has a strong Facebook presence, in addition to LinkedIn presence.
Rindova et al. (2006)	Reputation of employees	When organizations have very high-quality employees and customers, they are seen as having better images, and can charge a premium for their products.	Hire high-quality employees, develop them well, and publicize the image of the organization through the reputation of the employees.
Roberson et al. (2005)	Specificity of recruitment message	More specific recruitment message (e.g., "we offer 40–80 h of annual training" versus "we offer job related training") led to higher elemental image perceptions and job pursuit intentions.	Be specific (not general) about what the organization has to offer recruits.
Sivertzen et al. (2013)	Social media	Social media presence (rated by undergraduate students), especially as it related to job advertisements, was related to reputation perceptions, and in turn, application intentions.	Be conscious of the organization's social media presence; use it as much as possible to inform potential recruits about positions.
Slaughter et al. (2014)	Recruiter behavior during site visits	Recruiter warmth and competence positively and linearly affected image perceptions when recruits' pre-site visit confidence was low. These behaviors had a U-shaped curvilinear effect when confidence was high.	Assess recruits' pre-site visit belief confidence. If it is high, use your best recruiters to positively affect image. If it is low, you can use your "next-best" recruiters.
Van Hoye & Lievens (2007)	Website testimonial (from company) or word-of-mouth (web-based, company-independent)	Company-independent source was associated with higher credibility and stronger holistic image.	Treat employees well so that they spread positive word-of-mouth information about the company.

(Continued)

Table 2 (Continued)

Paper	Tactic(s) studied	Major finding(s)	Implication(s) for managing employer image
Walker et al. (2009)	Diversity on websites with rich information versus less rich information (audio and video versus picture and text)	Depicting more diverse employees was more attractive to black job seekers but less attractive to white ones; this effect was attenuated with a richer medium.	When presenting testimonials on websites, use video and not just text. To attract diverse applicants, depict a diverse set of employees.
Williamson et al. (2003)	Website orientation (screening versus recruitment versus dual-purpose)	Recruitment-oriented websites led to a more favorable holistic image (direct effect); recruiting and dual-purpose sites were also seen as having better content, which in turn positively affected image.	If the goal is to improve holistic image, use recruitment-oriented or dual-screening websites.

Abbreviations: FTF, face-to-face; PO, person-organization.

terms of an organization’s current employer image: no image or unfamiliar organization; familiar, but not well-known; negative image that requires repair; and highly familiar and positive image.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In addition to the section-specific future research directions throughout our review, some overarching themes for future research are presented in this final section. We envision the following six themes for research to focus on in the next years. **Table 4** also summarizes these avenues for future research and others that have been mentioned throughout this article.

Consistency Among Organizational Images

As noted, a company’s employment image is only one of the “images” of organizations. Other images are a company’s corporate, financial, or good citizen (CSP) image. These multiple organizational images might not always coincide. This issue becomes even more complicated for MNCs regarding whether the various images are/should be the same across divisions in different cultures. Although there exist conceptual papers about the need for aligning an organization’s employer image with an organization’s corporate image (e.g., Foster et al. 2010), empirical research is notably scarce in this domain. Research is also not informative as to which image is most important (for which outcome) and whether an organization’s employer image exerts spill-over effects on consumers’ product choices and/or vice versa.

If inconsistent organizational images are maintained over a relatively long period of time, we suspect that the dominant image for a given recruit—that is, the type of image that has the strongest effects on recruitment outcomes—depends largely on individual (and perhaps generational) differences. For example, there will always be some recruits who pay the most attention to pay and prestige, and thus they will pay attention to financial image and pay-related signals of employer image and for the most part ignore CSP image. Generationally, we know that work values have changed over time, such that the current generation of young people places more value on leisure and extrinsic rewards than on social and intrinsic rewards when considering a job, compared to previous generations (Twenge et al. 2010). Thus, it stands to reason that, compared with older generations, current high school and undergraduate students may have different values with respect to corporate image versus employer image versus CSP image.

Table 3 Practical suggestions for organizations with varying current image situations

Organization's current image situation	Research-based practical suggestion	Source
No image (unfamiliar organization)	Use low-information recruitment practices, such as general recruitment advertisements (e.g., banner ads on websites, posters) and sponsorship (e.g., donating equipment, funding events), to generate awareness of the organization on college campuses. Provide the maximum amount of information about the job and organization on company websites.	Collins (2007) Allen et al. (2007)
Familiar, but not well known	You can conserve recruiter resources by not using your most talented recruiters during formal recruitment visits. Those who are less familiar with the organization—those with low confidence in their initial beliefs about organizational image—will be highly impressionable during the site visit.	Slaughter et al. (2014)
Negative image (image requires repair)	Define cause of negative image by claim of uniqueness: "Our company may have an image because . . .," and "we are not like other companies that happen to have these same issues. . ." Accept responsibility for causes of the negative image. Accept that what is negative to some job seekers may be positive to others; seek to understand the types of applicants who will be attracted to your organization given its image.	Sutton & Callahan (1987) DeArmond & Crawford (2011) Highhouse et al. (1999) Kausel & Slaughter (2011)
Highly familiar and positive image	Make offers quickly, as there is a negative relationship between offer delay and offer acceptance. Use high-involvement recruitment practices such as detailed recruitment ads and employee endorsements (e.g., sending alumni back to campus to share experiences). Use your best and most highly trained recruiters. Only the most personable and competent recruiters can positively influence image perceptions among recruits who have crystallized beliefs about organizations.	Becker et al. (2010) Collins (2007) Slaughter et al. (2014)

Employer Image Strength

Our review shows that employer image research typically relies on a direct consensus model (Chan 1998, Schneider et al. 2002), implying that the meaning of the group-level construct (i.e., employer image) is based on the consensus among the lower level variables (individuals' perceptions of the employer image and its dimensions). However, there is very little research on the basic assumption as to whether individual constituents' perceptions are indeed in agreement. [For one exception, see Slaughter et al. 2004, who calculated $r_{wg(i)}$ values in the development of their scales.] Moreover, a direct consensus model might only be one part of the equation because a dispersion model might also be valuable. In a dispersion model, the meaning of the group-level construct reflects the variance of the lower level variables. The extent of within-group agreement among individuals on the employer image and its employer image dimensions can then be regarded as indicative of the strength of an employer's image. A strong employer image implies a common set of perceptions

Table 4 Summary of directions for future research on employer image and employer image management

Employer image and organizational images
What is the consistency among organizational images (financial, service/product, employer, etc.)? What are the effects of potential inconsistencies among organizational images (financial, service/product, employer, etc.)?
What are the effects of potential inconsistencies among employer image, employer reputation, and identity?
Which organizational image (financial, service/product, employer, etc.) is the most important and for which outcome?
Does an organization's employer image exert spill-over effects on consumers' product choices and/or vice versa?
Employer image dimensions and their measurement
What are communalities and higher-order dimensions of symbolic organizational personality inference measures?
Which employer image attributes are more universally attractive?
How do symbolic inferences associated with employer image translate to work commitment/job satisfaction?
What is the role of experiential employer image attributes and emotions in organizational attractiveness and job pursuit intentions?
Outcomes of employer image
Which employer image attributes serve as points of differentiation among employers in different industries and applicant groups?
Does an attractive workplace image pay off in better organizational performance? Does a company's employer image affect investment decisions?
How do disruptive events (e.g., downsizing, strikes, mergers, product recalls, financial crises, ecological disasters) impact a company's employer image?
How can organizations construct ("unbrand"/ "rebrand") positive images/identities after disruptive events?
Antecedents of employer image
What do applicants expect from recruiters? Specifically, to what degree do applicants see recruiters as trying to persuade or influence them, and how does this affect their reactions to recruitment interactions?
To what degree can negative interactions with recruiters be made up for by positive aspects of the recruitment process?
How does the content of word of mouth (i.e., exactly what was said during the word-of-mouth encounters, as opposed to just positive or negative valence) interact with information applicants already have about employers to affect employer image?
What are the effects of (a) appearance on the list of best places to work and (b) ranking on this list (e.g., #1, #50, #100) on (potential) applicants' perceptions of organizations' instrumental and symbolic attributes?
To what degree are organizations trying to manage the public's perceptions of the firm through social media? How effective are their efforts?
Mechanisms explaining image effects
To what degree are the mechanisms implied by the commonly used theories in employer image research (e.g., social identity, signaling, and elaboration likelihood models) actually responsible for the relations among employer images and their antecedents and outcomes?
Moderators of employer image-recruitment outcome relationships
What is the extent of agreement among individual constituents of employer images? How does lack of agreement (indicative of a weak employer image) affect applicant attraction and turnover?
How do symbolic inferences associated with employer image overlap with organizational culture perceptions?
What is the temporal stability of employer images?
Employer image management
What can organizations do to influence the images that job seekers hold?
How does the information passed from the word of mouth of current employees affect employer images held by job seekers?

among the individual constituents, whereas the opposite is indicative of a weak employer image. So far, the strength of an employer image has remained unexplored. So, future research should examine individual constituents' agreement on the employer image and whether potential variation (reflecting a weaker employer image) impacts important outcomes such as applicant attraction or turnover (Lievens et al. 2015).

Impact of Disruptions on Employer Image

Most of our employer image knowledge is based on well-known companies across short time spans and in relatively stable environments. This state of affairs does not reflect the turbulent business environment characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Accordingly, there is a lack of knowledge of how disruptive events impact a company's employer image. Although some of these disruptive events are employment-related (e.g., downsizing, strikes), most of them go beyond the employment context. Examples include mergers, product recalls, financial crises, and ecological disasters, thereby highlighting again how employer image and other images are interwoven.

Edwards & Edwards (2013) conducted a case study in which they examined the impact of a multinational acquisition on changes in employer image dimensions. Interestingly, employee perceptions linked to aspects of the employment brand that were formed just after the acquisition (i.e., an organization's so-called transitional identity; see, e.g., Clark et al. 2010) impacted organizational identification, citizenship behavior, and turnover intention a year later. In addition, changes in postmerger perceptions (e.g., perceived uniqueness of the employment experiences) were also related to changes in these attitudes. All of this suggests that organizations should pay greater attention to the formation of this transitional identity because it provides employees with a sense of the new organization and reduces uncertainty. As this study was conducted among employees and deals with identity, more research is needed on how disruptive events impact a company's organizational image and reputation. We also need to determine whether these effects extend to prehire (attraction, job pursuit intention) and posthire (e.g., identification, turnover) outcomes. We further suggest that future research should rely on Ashforth & Kreiner's (2002) models about constructing positive identities and normalizing disruptive events.

Employer Image, Branding, and Hard Outcomes

In our review, we identified only one study (Fulmer et al. 2003) about the effects of employer image on firm performance. We recommend more research along these lines. Various marketing studies on the effects of brand(ing) on financial performance can serve as exemplars (e.g., Rao et al. 2004). Relatedly, we also need to know whether a company's employer image affects investment decisions. That is, do firms with a good employer image have competitive leverage in terms of attracting new investors or keeping existing ones?

Use of Alternative Research Methodologies

Knowledge about employer image and employer branding is mostly based on the traditional self-report paradigm. This contrasts with developments in marketing research. Marketing researchers have considerably widened the number of their methodologies. Examples are social network analysis, digital marketing techniques (e.g., Google analytics), physiological approaches (e.g., eye-movement tracking), and neuroscientific methods.

Better Integration between Employer Image and Other Literatures

As shown in this review, the effects of employer image go beyond just recruitment outcomes. So far, however, there has been little theoretical connection or empirical linkage between the employer image field and related literatures (e.g., job search, organizational identification, socialization, and turnover literatures). However, there exist various intriguing opportunities for cross-fertilization. In recent years, for example, the boundaries between what are (and are not) recruitment activities have become increasingly blurred. Cable & Yu (2014) offered some excellent examples. For instance, they state that the design of the company building, the art in the rooms,

or the recruiter's clothes might exert recruiting signals. Apart from widening what we understand under recruitment, this also challenges researchers examining recruitment effectiveness. Another example is examining how the symbolic inferences associated with employer image translate to work commitment/job satisfaction and overlap with organizational culture perceptions.

CONCLUSION

This review has focused on what we have learned from theory and research focused on employer image since Cable & Turban's (2001) paper on this topic. The question that we posed in the introduction to this article is whether we know more about employer image than we did in 2001. We believe that the answer to this question is a resounding "yes." Research has advanced our understanding of the consequences and antecedents of employer image, as well as the many moderators of these relationships and some of the theoretically based mediating mechanisms responsible for them. There is still much work to be done, however. As we have advocated in the last section, a focus on issues such as rebranding after disruptive events, the hard (economic) outcomes of employer image, and using innovative methodologies beyond self-report will help to further advance scientific knowledge and improve practice on employer image and employer image management.

SUMMARY POINTS

1. We must carefully define the constructs used in the organization image domain; in service of construct clarity, we recommend that researchers and practitioners stick to these definitions and refrain from inventing new terms for already existing constructs.
2. In terms of elementalistic employer image dimensions, an ad hoc (bottom-up) approach has been followed mostly for assessing instrumental attributes; conversely, existing theoretical frameworks (e.g., brand personality and human personality) have been employed in a top-down manner for constructing symbolic trait inference scales, which makes these symbolic measures more generalizable across organizations, industries, and cultures. In the case of a holistic approach to employer image, an overall organizational attractiveness measure has been used.
3. Employer image helps applicants to distinguish among employers, results in applicant pools that are larger and of higher quality, leads to quicker decision making and a stronger emotional bond, and is associated with higher organizational financial performance.
4. For antecedents of employer image, our review identified the following: organizational actions and characteristics outside of the recruitment process, such as firm profitability, size, and advertising; information disseminated by organizations, including through web pages, advertisements, and recruiters; and information disseminated by nonorganizational sources, such as through WOM and the news media.
5. Most research on image references one of three theories regarding mediating mechanisms but these mechanisms are rarely tested directly; we encourage researchers to follow the examples of Jones et al. (2014), DeVecchio et al. (2007), and Yu (2014) and to explicitly test mechanisms implied by theories about effects of image.

6. To summarize the research on individual difference moderators, researchers began the post-2001 period in a more exploratory mode, examining either all potential intuitively appealing personality moderators or choosing a single individual difference. More recent work, however, has taken a more thoughtful and theoretical approach, and we believe this has substantially enhanced our knowledge of how to target specific types of applicants based on their psychological and demographic characteristics. So far, research on temporal moderators has received the least attention, but the available evidence gathered shows that applicants weight employer image dimensions differentially across the different stages.
7. Regarding cross-cultural differences, over the past several years, noteworthy conceptual and empirical progress has been made in this domain. Most of the studies have tackled the same issue, namely whether cultural values moderate the importance attached to employer image dimensions; as a general conclusion, it seems useful for organizations to emphasize in their recruitment efforts their specific organizational/job attributes that fit the culture of interest.

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Errata

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