Organizational Identity and Employer Image: Towards a Unifying Framework*

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This study aims to bridge two research streams that have evolved relatively apart from each other, namely the research streams on organizational identity and on employer branding (employer image). In particular, we posit that it is crucial to examine which factors company outsiders (applicants) as well as company insiders (employees) associate with a given employer. To this end, this study uses the instrumental–symbolic framework to study factors relating to both employer image and organizational identity of the Belgian Army. Two samples are used: a sample of 258 Army applicants and a sample of 179 military employees. Results show that both instrumental and symbolic perceived image dimensions predict applicants' attraction to the Army. Conversely, symbolic perceived identity dimensions best predict employees' identification with the Army. Results further show that employees also attach importance to outsiders' assessment of the organization (construed external image). Theoretical and practical implications for managing organizational identity and image are discussed.

Introduction

In social situations such as cocktail parties, dinners or alumni reunions, there is a high probability that we have to answer the question for which organization we work. If we subsequently tell who our employer is and the conversation sways almost immediately in another direction, this might indicate that the organization is held in low regard. However, if people express their appreciation and keep talking about the organization, this might suggest that the organization is highly valued. We will typically compare the information received from outsiders of the organization to what we as insiders of the

organization believe the company stands for. When an employer is viewed favourably by ourselves and by others, organizational membership probably enhances our self-esteem and our organizational identification is likely to be strong. The reverse happens when an employer is held in low regard. In other words, this so-called 'cocktail party test' provides valuable information for individuals gauging which employers are held in high (or low) regard and how outsiders are judging them.

From a theoretical point of view, the issues elicited by this cocktail party test can be framed in the context of social identity theory (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Haslam, 2001; Van Dick, 2004). According to this theory, people's identity and self-esteem are partly determined by their membership of social organizations, such as the organization they work for or their specific workgroup. Although social identity theory was originally developed to explain intergroup relations, it has heavily influenced research on organizational identity

and identification in the last 15 years (see Ashforth and Mael, 1989; and for overviews see Haslam, 2001; Van Dick, 2004). The basic premise is that organizational members develop a sense of who they are, what their goals and attitudes are and what they ought to do from their organizational membership, with empirical research providing support for this premise (e.g. Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994; Riordan, Gatewood and Bill, 1997). It is further posited that both the perceived organizational identity (i.e. insiders' perception of what the organization stands for) and the construed external image (i.e. insiders' perception of what outsiders think the organization stands for) of an organization are related to people's identification with that organization (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994).

Prior studies have paid little attention to the specific components that determine employees' perceived organizational identity and their construed external image of organizations. It is against this backdrop that we want to examine whether recent insights in the fields of employer branding and corporate image might be useful for delineating the factors related to company insiders' identification with the organization. Conceptually, this is an important endeavour because it might help to bridge two research streams that have evolved relatively apart from each other, namely the research stream on organizational identity and the one on organizational attraction (employer image) (Hatch and Schultz, 2000). At a practical level, it is crucial to study identity and attractiveness together because organizations typically want to attract talent by developing an attractive employer image while at the same time ensuring that this image is consistent with employees' views of the identity of the organization. The latter is in line with recent models of corporate identity management that have stressed the importance for organizations to maintain a generally consistent image among relevant stakeholder groups (Balmer and Greyser, 2002; Gray and Balmer, 1998). Therefore, the present study applies the instrumental–symbolic framework to examine which factors attract and connect employees (company insiders) as well as applicants (company outsiders) to a given organization as an employer.

This study is situated in the Belgian Army. The Army provides a relevant context for study-ing employer image and identity because of its prestige, distinctive identity and ingroup awareness. In addition, the armed forces are having considerable difficulties in attracting and enlisting the required numbers of new recruits (Bachman et al., 2000; Knowles et al., 2002), while at the same time facing a large amount of attrition in military recruits and employees (Flach, De Jager and Van de Ven, 2000; Huffman et al., 2000).

Theoretical background

Organizational identity

In recent years, organizational identity has received a lot of attention in both the practitioner and academic literatures. Several disciplines (e.g. marketing, organization studies, strategic management, social and organizational psychology) have examined and discussed the topic from a variety of research paradigms (for excellent overviews, see Cornelissen, 2002a, 2002b; Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2002a, 2002b; Haslam, Postmes and Ellemers, 2003; Hatch and Schultz, 2000). One particularly influential stream of research in the domain of organization studies has been the work of Dukerich and colleagues, distinguishing two types of organizational identities, namely (a) members' own perceptions of the image of the organization and (b) members' assessment of others' perceptions of the image of the organization. Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994) labelled insiders' own image perceptions as the organization's perceived identity. So, this relates to what employees see as their organization's distinctive, central and enduring attributes as a place to work. Conversely, according to Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994), the construed external image reflects the extent to which insiders experience that their organization is perceived as positive/negative by outsiders. Thus, construed external image was defined as the employees' perceptions of the external evaluation of their organization. Members' view of outsiders' inferences about the organization is of key importance to members because it represents their best assessment of what features outsiders are likely to ascribe to them due to their organizational membership. Therefore, Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994) posited that the construed external image serves as a powerful mirror to individuals

for gauging the value of their organization and themselves.

The distinction between perceived organizational identity and construed external image has proven to be particularly fruitful, as they have both been found to guide individuals' interpretation of organizational issues and to affect organizational actions over time (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Gioia and Thomas, 1996). Furthermore, especially relevant for this study was the finding that both perceived organizational identity and construed external image were strongly related to employees' organizational identification (Dukerich, Golden and Shortell, 2002; Riordan, Gatewood and Bill, 1997). Organizational identification is a specific form of social identification in which people define themselves in terms of their membership of a particular organization. Organizational identification is defined as individuals' *cognitive* perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Hence, an individual's organization may provide a partial answer to the 'Who am I?' question. This cognitive (self-categorization) dimension has typically been identified as the core of organizational identification, as this first step might eventually lead to the expression of the affective, evaluative and behavioural components of identification (e.g. Riketta, 2005). For instance, Dukerich, Golden and Shortell showed that organizational identification in turn was related to employees' cooperative behaviour.

Whereas these studies have yielded important insights concerning the effects of organizational identity and construed external image for understanding organizational behaviour, a number of shortcomings should be noted. First, prior empirical studies have not explored differences and communalities among these two images (perceived organizational identity and construed external image). This is because no common framework for comparing these two images is available. For instance, Dukerich, Golden and Shortell (2002) noted that there is no established measure of organizational identity that can be used in survey research. Therefore, they used two different measures for assessing organizational identity and construed external image in their study of cooperative behaviours of physicians. On the one hand the components in the perceived organizational identity measure were based on

attributes extracted from focus group interviews. On the other hand the construed external image was measured with items from Luhtanen and Crocker's (1992) collective self-esteem scale. Similarly, Gioia and Thomas (1996) used a nine-item scale measuring utilitarian versus normative character as a measure of perceived organizational identity. To measure construed external image, they instructed respondents to rate how other peer institutions would rate their institution along ten dimensions (e.g. quality of students, academic climate). The use of these *ad hoc* scales is not only troublesome in the long run for comparing results across studies. In addition, it may hinder comparing perceived organizational identity and construed external image to each other. Such comparisons are important because it has been suggested that a member's organizational identification is contingent upon the consistency between that member's perceived organizational identity and his/her construed external image (Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994).

As a second limitation of previous research, little attention has been paid as to how perceived organizational identity and construed external image relate to the external organizational image of outsiders. Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994) labelled these outsiders' perceptions 'corporate reputation' and distinguished them from construed external image perceptions. In particular, they noted that insiders' assessment of how outsiders see the organization (construed external image) may not be identical to outsiders' actual assessment of the organization (corporate reputation). Until now, little empirical evidence is available in support of this proposition. This is unfortunate as several scholars (e.g. Balmer and Greyser, 2002) have cogently argued that meaningful incongruences between the different identities and images of an organization can cause problems for a company with its relevant stakeholders. Thus, it may be important for organizations to dispose of a common framework to accurately depict the various company identities and images. As a first step towards this common framework, we propose to bring in the instrumental–symbolic framework from the employer branding literature that has been very useful for explaining applicant attraction to organizations. Using this common basis, we try to bridge the domains of organizational identity

and corporate branding (employer image) as has been called for in previous work (e.g. Hatch and Schultz, 2000).

Employer branding

Almost independently from the research on organizational identity, employer branding has recently received a lot of attention as a specific form of managing corporate identities by creating, both within and outside the firm, an image of the organization as a distinct and desirable employer (Ambler and Barrow, 1996; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Balmer and Greyser, 2002). Employer branding has emerged from applying marketing principles to the field of personnel recruitment (Cable and Turban, 2001; Capowski, 1997; Maurer, Howe and Lee, 1992). To date, research on employer branding is still relatively scarce. Empirical evidence has been found that various early recruitment practices can be used to externally market the brand (Collins and Stevens, 2002) and that employer branding has beneficial effects in terms of increasing applicant quantity and quality (Collins and Han, 2004) and organizational performance (Fulmer, Gerhart and Scott, 2003).

Ambler and Barrow (1996) defined the employer brand in terms of benefits, calling it 'the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company'. This definition is consistent with categorizations of brand concepts in the brand management literature (Gardner and Levy, 1955; Katz, 1960; Park, Jaworski and MacInnis, 1986). For instance, Park, Jaworski and MacInnis (1986) divided brands in three categories on the basis of the consumer needs they fulfil: (a) functional needs, (b) symbolic needs, and (c) experiential needs. Functional or instrumental brand benefits describe the product in terms of objective, physical and tangible attributes that a product either has or does not have. These product-related attributes enable consumers to maximize benefits and minimize costs (i.e. consumption-related problems). Symbolic aspects describe the product in terms of subjective, abstract and intangible attributes that accrue from how people perceive a product (user imagery) and make inferences about it rather than what they think a product does or has. Symbolic attributes are linked to people's need to maintain their self-identity, to enhance their self-image, or to express themselves (their beliefs, their traits and their personality) (Aaker, 1997, 1999; Katz, 1960; Shavitt, 1990). Finally, experiential brand concepts emphasize the brand's effect on sensory satisfaction or cognitive stimulation.

Current employer branding research has primarily relied on the instrumental and symbolic distinction. The experiential category was not used because it was more difficult to translate from a product context to an employment and organizational context (Lievens and Highhouse, 2003). Specifically, Lievens and Highhouse defined instrumental attributes as describing the job or organization in terms of objective, concrete and factual attributes that the job or organization either has or does not have. Symbolic attributes were described as subjective, abstract and intangible attributes that convey symbolic company information in the form of imagery and trait inferences that applicants assign to organizations. Lievens and Highhouse reported that symbolic image dimensions accounted for incremental variance over and above instrumental attributes in predicting a bank's perceived attractiveness as an employer. Moreover, it was easier to differentiate among banks on the basis of symbolic dimensions, versus instrumental job and organizational attributes. In another study, Slaughter *et al.* (2004) focused on the symbolic image dimensions and confirmed that they were related to organizational attractiveness. In addition, they found that specific traits assigned to organizations were more attractive depending on last-year students' personality traits. People tended to be especially attracted to organizations with traits similar to their own traits. Finally, Lievens, Van Hoye and Schreurs (2005) confirmed the incremental variance of symbolic image dimensions over and above instrumental image components in explaining students' attraction to the Army.

Present study

In this study, we want to examine whether the instrumental–symbolic conceptualization that has been used for describing company outsiders' early attraction to a firm might also be useful for delineating the factors related to company insiders' identification with the organization.

Given that employer branding has both an external and internal component, it might be worthwhile to examine whether the same unifying framework can be used for describing the employer brand internally and externally, bridging the research streams on organizational identity and employer image. We expect that the instrumental–symbolic framework might be well suited to serve this end.

This expectation is based on the following two conceptual reasons. First, the assumption that applicants ascribe symbolic meanings and traits to organizations because these traits enable them to maintain their self-identity, to enhance their self-image or to express themselves (Katz, 1960) echoes the aforementioned assumptions underlying social identity theory (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994). Therefore, the finding that symbolic meanings account for incremental variance in explaining a company's attractiveness as an employer might translate well to the importance of symbolic meanings in the development and management of organizational identification (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Second, the instrumental and symbolic attributes that applicants perceive to be related to an organization as a place to work map well into the factors that are posited to be related to organizational identification. For instance, the distinctive, central and relatively enduring attributes (e.g. trustworthy, competent, up-to-date) that Dukerich, Golden and Shortell (2002) used to describe an organization's identity bear close resemblance to the symbolic trait factors identified by Lievens and Highhouse (2003).

Taken together, we believe that the instrumental attributes and especially the symbolic attributes that have been associated with employer image among outsiders (applicants) are conceptually similar to the factors that are related to perceived organizational identity and construed external image among insiders (employees). Hence, they might also predict employees' identification with the employer. This leads to the following set of hypotheses.

H1: Applicants' perceived image of the Army (i.e. applicants' perceptions of the Army's instrumental and symbolic attributes) will be positively associated with their attraction to the Army.

H2a: Military employees' perceived identity of the Army (i.e. employees' perceptions of the Army's instrumental and symbolic attributes) will be positively associated with their identification with the Army.

H2b: Military employees' construed external image of the Army (i.e. employees' perceptions of how outsiders perceive the Army's instrumental and symbolic attributes) will be positively associated with their identification with the Army.

Method

Participants

Two samples were used. To test our hypotheses related to identification, the sample consisted of 179 military employees who were enlisted in the Belgian Army (95% men, 5% women; mean age 31.6 years, SD = 8.8 years). Their average tenure with the Army was 13.0 years (SD = 9.4 years). Given that the importance of specific identity dimensions might differ across Army commands, we concentrated on the Ground Forces, which constitute the largest command in the Belgian Army. Sixty-eight per cent of the respondents were soldiers, 24% were non-commissioned officers and 8% were officers. The response rate was 99%. This high response rate resulted from the fact that research assistants distributed the questionnaires during a work break.

To test our hypotheses related to attractiveness, the second sample consisted of people who applied for a job in the Army. However, for reasons of consistency with the first sample, only people applying for a job in the Army's Ground Forces were included. People interested in a job in the Belgian Army's Ground Forces make up about 65% of all applicants. Applying for a job in the Belgian Army is done at Army recruitment offices. We received participation from the largest Army recruitment office in each of the five main regions in Belgium, ensuring that the sample of applicants was geographically representative. Individuals who applied for a job in one of these five recruitment offices in January 2004 were asked to complete the research questionnaire. We emphasized that participation was voluntary and anonymous and that the data provided would in

no way affect the selection decision. Applicants completed this questionnaire prior to taking the psychometric tests of the selection procedure. Two hundred and fifty-eight applicants were willing to participate in the study, yielding a response rate of over 75%. The applicant sample consisted of 93% male applicants and 7% female applicants. The mean age was 21.4 years (SD = 3.4 years).

Apart from the focus of both samples on the Ground Forces command of the Belgian Army, these two samples were also similar in terms of gender composition and educational background. Specifically, the military employee and applicant samples were male-dominated and over 95% of the respondents in both samples had a high school degree.

Measures

Instrumental attributes. We conducted a pre-study to identify possible instrumental job and organizational attributes related to the Belgian Army as a place to work. In particular, research assistants conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups with a number of military employees, prompting them to describe the Army as an employer (see Lievens, Van Hoye and Schreurs, 2005). After audio-taping and transcribing the interviews, research assistants extracted the primary characteristics per interviewee from the transcripts and sorted them into distinct categories. Characteristics tied to a specific division of the Army (e.g. 'become a pilot') or given by a small percentage of the respondents (e.g. 'serve your country') were removed. This resulted in the following eight instrumental attributes: opportunity for social/team activities, opportunity for sports (physical activities), provision of good salaries, advancement opportunities, job security, task diversity, opportunity to work in a structured (disciplined) environment, and travel opportunities. Finally, these eight characteristics served as a basis for writing three to four items per attribute (e.g. 'working in the Army provides you with a good salary'). Respondents answered these items using a five-point rating scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). All respondents were asked to rate these items on the basis of their own perceptions (perceived image/identity). The employees were also asked to rate these items

on the basis of their perceptions of what others thought of them (construed external image).

We examined the psychometric properties of this measure by checking the internal consistencies of the scales. Items within the scales were removed if removal of them meant that the internal consistency (homogeneity) of the scale increased. Next, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis using EQS (Bentler, 1995). To increase sample size, this analysis was conducted in the total sample (applicants and military employees). The confirmatory factor analysis showed that the eight-factor model did not provide a good fit to the data. Inspection of the modification indices showed that a better fit could be obtained with a more parsimonious model consisting of six factors. In this model, items related to advancement and task variety were specified to load on one factor. Similarly, items related to sports and team activities were merged to represent one factor. As these modifications were conceptually meaningful, we tested this six-factor model via confirmatory factor analysis. Results showed that the six-factor model produced a good fit to the data. The fit indices obtained were the following: CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.05 (perceived image/identity), and CFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.05 (construed external image). All internal consistencies of the separate scales were satisfactory, varying from 0.73 to 0.88.

Symbolic attributes. We used the scale of Lievens, Van Hoye and Schreurs (2005) for measuring the Army's symbolic attributes. This scale is an adapted version of Aaker's (1997) scale for measuring symbolic attributes related to brands. In a comprehensive study, Aaker (1997) asked 613 subjects to rate 37 brands on 114 traits (the latter were already a subset of a more elaborate list of 309 non-redundant person-descriptive traits). Results of exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses showed that the symbolic use of brands (in terms of the human traits associated with them) could be represented by five broad factors: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness (see also Aaker, Benet-Martinez and Garolera, 2001). Lievens, Van Hoye and Schreurs (2005) examined the applicability of the Aaker scale in a recruitment context and found it to be a reliable and valid instrument for measuring the symbolic

attributes that applicants ascribe to organizations. Respondents indicated their agreement with these items using a five-point rating scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Similar to the measure of instrumental attributes, all respondents had to ascribe these traits to the Army themselves (perceived image/identity). The employees also indicated the extent to which they thought others would ascribe these traits to the Army (construed external image). The psychometric properties of this measure were examined by conducting a confirmatory factor analysis, revealing that the five-factor model provided a good fit to the symbolic attribute ratings. The following fit indices were obtained: CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.04 (perceived image/identity), and CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.05 (construed external image). Similar to Lievens, Van Hoye and Schreurs (2005), the following five factors emerged (example items between parentheses): sincerity (e.g. honest, sincere), excitement (e.g. daring, exciting), competence (e.g. intelligent, technical), prestige (e.g. high status, highly regarded), and ruggedness (e.g. tough, rugged). The internal consistencies of these scales were generally satisfactory (internal consistencies for construed external image are in parentheses): sincerity 0.90 (0.92), excitement 0.90 (0.90), competence 0.80 (0.81), prestige 0.68 (0.75), and ruggedness 0.73 (0.80).

Organizational attractiveness. To measure the Army's perceived attractiveness as an employer, three items were adapted from the scale of organizational attractiveness proposed by Highhouse, Lievens and Sinar (2003). An example item is 'For me, the Army would be a good place to work'. Respondents rated these items on a five-point rating scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The internal consistency of this scale was 0.86. This scale was included only in the applicant sample.

Organizational identification. Mael and Ashforth's (1995) five-item organizational identification scale was used to measure military employees' identification with the Army. Organizational identification is defined as individuals' *cognitive* perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Mael and Ashforth also used this scale in a military

context. The scale has been found to be empirically distinguishable from commitment measures (Van Dick, 2004). An example item is 'When someone criticizes the Army, it feels like a personal insult'. Respondents answered these items on a five-point rating scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale was included only in the employee sample. The internal consistency of the scale was 0.78.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Tables 1 and 2 present the means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of the independent and dependent variables in the two samples. To highlight the discrepancies between outsiders' perceived image of the organization (applicants' perspective), insiders' perceived identity of the organization (employees' perspective) and construed external image of the organization (employees' perspective on how others perceive the organization), we plotted the means of all image dimensions for each group in Figure 1. This figure suggests that, in general, applicants seem to rate the image dimensions higher than military employees. Moreover, it appears that employees' own perceptions of the image dimensions are lower than their perceptions of what others think about the Army. Thus, several different images of the Army seem to exist in different stakeholder groups.

As can be seen, the mean attractiveness rating in the applicant sample was very high (M = 4.57; SD = 0.48). This is not surprising because the sample consisted of applicants who went to an Army recruitment office to apply for a military job. Most of the perceived image dimensions were significantly related to applicants' attraction to the Army as an employer. The only exception was the symbolic dimension ruggedness. This shows that our pre-study was successful in identifying the components of the Army's image as an employer. In the military employee sample, the mean for identification was 3.26 (SD = 0.86). As shown, most perceived identity and construed external image dimensions were significantly related to employees' identification with the Army. Finally, the correlations between the perceived identity and construed external image dimensions deserve attention. These correlations

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations among study variables in the applicant sample (n = 258)

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Perceived image dimensions													
1. Team/Sports	4.47	0.54											
2. Structure	4.52	0.53	0.52										
3. Advancement	4.07	0.62	0.35	0.38									
4. Travel	3.90	0.75	0.32	0.37	0.50								
5. Pay	3.42	0.82	0.38	0.34	0.39	0.34							
6. Job security	4.36	0.56	0.42	0.39	0.47	0.38	0.42						
7. Sincerity	4.27	0.66	0.39	0.36	0.27	0.17	0.25	0.31					
8. Excitement	4.41	0.62	0.44	0.39	0.37	0.38	0.32	0.30	0.17				
9. Competence	4.15	0.60	0.34	0.31	0.36	0.39	0.33	0.31	0.27	0.34			
10. Prestige	3.49	0.73	0.38	0.32	0.37	0.32	0.49	0.41	0.30	0.30	0.26		
11. Ruggedness	3.02	1.05	0.10	0.12	0.06	0.15	0.08	0.06	− 0.03	0.28	0.13	0.19	
Dependent variable													
12. Attractiveness	4.56	0.48	0.51	0.55	0.38	0.36	0.31	0.47	0.37	0.42	0.41	0.32	0.00

Note: Correlations ≥ 0.13 are significant at $p < 0.05$ and correlations ≥ 0.17 at $p < 0.01$. All measures were rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

vary from a low 0.35 (related to perceptions of travel opportunities in the Army) to a high 0.80 (related to perceptions of job security in the Army). Thus, for some dimensions, there seems to be a substantial overlap between what insiders believe themselves versus what they believe the outside world thinks. Conversely, for other dimensions, the distinction between one's own perceptions and one's assessments of others' perceptions seems to be useful as these two types of perception share only about 10% of variance.

Test of hypotheses

As already mentioned, most correlations between applicants' perceived image dimensions and their attractiveness to the Army were significantly different from zero. This already provides some support for Hypothesis 1. To further test Hypothesis 1 we conducted a hierarchical regression analysis. Given the large number of independent variables and their intercorrelations, this is a stringent test of Hypothesis 1. In the regression analysis, we first entered gender as a control variable because prior research found a significant relationship between applicant gender and enlistment (Bachman *et al.*, 2000). In the second step, we entered the instrumental image dimensions. Finally, in the third step, we entered the symbolic image dimensions. Conceptually, it was relevant to enter the symbolic attributes after the instrumental image dimensions because they typically accrue from these more concrete attri-

butes (see Lievens and Highhouse, 2003). For example, one might infer that working for the Army is exciting due to one's belief that there is ample opportunity to engage in adventurous team and sports activities in the Army.

Table 3 presents the regression results in the applicant sample. As can be seen, the total set of perceived image dimensions explained 48% of the variance. Applicants' perceptions of team/sports activities, structure, job security, excitement, and competence emerged as significantly positive predictors of the Army's attractiveness as an employer, whereas applicants' perception of ruggedness was a significantly negative predictor. So, there is support for Hypothesis 1.

We also used hierarchical regression analyses for testing Hypotheses 2a and 2b. Here organizational tenure served as a control variable as some studies found a significant relationship between tenure and identification (Schneider, Hall and Nygren, 1971; Wan-Huggins, Riordan and Griffeth, 1998). Table 4 presents the summary of the hierarchical regression analyses in the employee sample. The set of perceived identity dimensions explained less variance ($R^2 = 0.26$) than the set of construed external image dimensions ($R^2 = 0.31$). This suggests that employees' identification with the Army was better predicted on the basis of their beliefs of outsiders' perceptions of the Army's instrumental and symbolic attributes than on the basis of their own perceptions. Inspection of the specific attributes confirms this. Regarding the perceived identity

Table 2. Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations among study variables in the employee sample (n = 179)

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
Perceived identity dimensions																								
1. Team/Sports	4.02	0.67																						
2. Structure	3.28	0.79	0.41																					
3. Advancement	3.35	0.76	0.37	0.38																				
4. Travel	2.94	0.78	0.22	0.30	0.39																			
5. Pay	2.36	0.88	0.02	0.12	0.27	0.14																		
6. Job security	3.91	0.70	0.42	0.29	0.22	0.15	0.11																	
7. Sincerity	2.94	0.79	0.23	0.44	0.27	0.20	0.29	0.28																
8. Excitement	3.05	0.84	0.27	0.46	0.34	0.33	0.15	0.20	0.35															
9. Competence	3.22	0.72	0.44	0.53	0.40	0.22	0.24	0.22	0.48	0.53														
10. Prestige	2.60	0.72	0.31	0.43	0.40	0.17	0.32	0.27	0.51	0.43	0.44													
11. Ruggedness	2.82	0.85	0.24	0.26	0.21	0.20	0.17	0.13	0.25	0.33	0.31	0.27												
Construed external image dimensions																								
12. Team/Sports	3.96	0.68	0.67	0.41	0.37	0.17	0.12	0.41	0.25	0.24	0.42	0.27	0.23											
13. Structure	3.69	0.77	0.39	0.43	0.35	0.17	0.23	0.38	0.24	0.40	0.51	0.28	0.21	0.58										
14. Advancement	3.58	0.73	0.32	0.23	0.37	0.19	0.18	0.29	0.21	0.28	0.36	0.24	0.29	0.62	0.49									
15. Travel	3.45	0.70	0.25	0.22	0.19	0.35	0.03	0.15	0.00	0.29	0.24	0.10	0.19	0.42	0.52	0.54								
16. Pay	2.90	1.00	0.03	0.19	0.20	0.05	0.36	0.12	0.18	0.12	0.28	0.28	0.18	0.23	0.28	0.49	0.32							
17. Job security	4.11	0.68	0.42	0.21	0.27	0.13	0.09	0.80	0.25	0.19	0.21	0.19	0.14	0.56	0.48	0.38	0.25	0.15						
18. Sincerity	3.06	0.85	0.17	0.38	0.36	0.22	0.30	0.22	0.43	0.32	0.39	0.42	0.13	0.29	0.34	0.33	0.20	0.25	0.22					
19. Excitement	3.53	0.90	0.26	0.29	0.22	0.12	−0.01	0.24	0.13	0.42	0.40	0.25	0.17	0.35	0.46	0.36	0.35	0.31	0.31	0.45				
20. Competence	3.18	0.81	0.21	0.36	0.33	0.11	0.07	0.09	0.27	0.35	0.58	0.27	0.20	0.32	0.40	0.36	0.26	0.27	0.13	0.46	0.57			
21. Prestige	2.82	0.82	0.19	0.30	0.35	0.14	0.27	0.15	0.32	0.27	0.32	0.59	0.24	0.39	0.35	0.52	0.27	0.48	0.16	0.42	0.32	0.34		
22. Ruggedness	3.41	0.98	0.13	0.10	0.09	0.08	0.10	0.13	0.02	0.21	0.20	0.02	0.37	0.24	0.46	0.34	0.37	0.27	0.22	0.21	0.48	0.35	0.20	
Dependent variable																								
23. Identification	3.26	0.86	0.30	0.35	0.32	0.21	0.12	0.14	0.24	0.34	0.43	0.26	0.20	0.41	0.42	0.22	0.26	0.22	0.25	0.16	0.27	0.32	0.26	0.23

Note: Correlations $\geq$ 0.15 are significant at $p < 0.05$ and correlations $\geq$ 0.20 at $p < 0.01$.
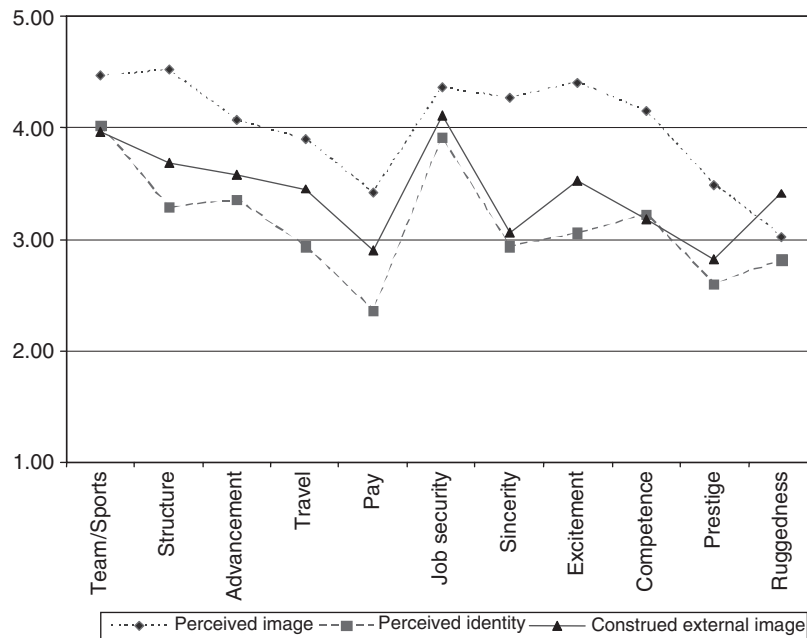
Figure 1. A comparison of perceived image, perceived identity and construed external image dimensions

Table 3. Summary of hierarchical regression analysis of the Army's attractiveness as an employer on perceived image dimensions in applicant sample (n = 258)

	β	t	p	R^2	Adj. R^2	ΔR^2
Step 1						
Gender	0.06	1.15	0.25	0.00	0.00	0.00
Step 2						
Team/Sports	0.14	2.36	0.02			
Structure	0.27	4.57	0.00			
Advancement	0.02	0.25	0.80			
Travel	0.04	0.72	0.47			
Pay	−0.06	−1.07	0.29			
Job security	0.18	3.11	0.00	0.43	0.41	0.43**
Step 3						
Sincerity	0.09	1.72	0.09			
Excitement	0.15	2.60	0.01			
Competence	0.17	3.06	0.00			
Prestige	0.02	0.33	0.74			
Ruggedness	−0.11	−2.24	0.03	0.48	0.45	0.05**

Note: Parameter estimates are for final step, not entry. Due to rounding, ΔR^2 might differ 0.01 from cumulative R^2.
**$p < 0.01$.

dimensions, only one symbolic attribute, competence, was a significant predictor of identification, providing only partial support for Hypothesis 2a. Conversely, employees' beliefs of outsiders' assessments of the Army's team/sports activities, structure, advancement opportunities, and competence were significant predictors of identification. This supports Hypothesis 2b.

Discussion

This study examined if the instrumental–symbolic conceptualization from the employer branding literature might serve as a unifying framework for delineating the factors related to employee identification as well as to applicant attraction. From a conceptual point of view, this study provides a first step to integrating two research streams that have evolved apart from each other, namely the research stream on organizational identity and the one on employer image. Several interesting conclusions can be drawn.

First, this study confirmed that the instrumental–symbolic framework is a useful conceptualization of an employer's image among outsiders (Ambler and Barrow, 1996; Lievens and Highhouse, 2003). Applicants' attraction to the Army was related to both instrumental (i.e. team/sports activities, structure, and job security) and symbolic (i.e. excitement, competence, and ruggedness) image dimensions. In addition, symbolic trait inferences explained incremental variance over and above perceptions of instrumental job

Table 4. Summary of hierarchical regression analyses of the identification with the Army on perceived identity and construed external image dimensions in military employee sample (n = 179)

	β	t	p	R^2	Adj. R^2	ΔR^2
Perceived identity dimensions						
Step 1						
Tenure	0.09	1.22	0.22	0.00	0.00	0.00
Step 2						
Team/Sports	0.13	1.54	0.13			
Structure	0.08	0.87	0.38			
Advancement	0.07	0.78	0.44			
Travel	0.02	0.20	0.84			
Pay	−0.01	−0.08	0.94			
Job security	−0.07	−0.85	0.40	0.19	0.16	0.19**
Step 3						
Sincerity	−0.02	−0.20	0.84			
Excitement	0.09	1.05	0.30			
Competence	0.27	2.82	0.01			
Prestige	0.06	0.72	0.47			
Ruggedness	0.01	0.19	0.85	0.26	0.21	0.07*
Construed external image dimensions						
Step 1						
Tenure	0.11	1.62	0.11	0.00	0.00	0.00
Step 2						
Team/Sports	0.31	3.06	0.00			
Structure	0.24	2.44	0.02			
Advancement	−0.27	−2.77	0.01			
Travel	0.04	0.51	0.61			
Pay	0.13	1.56	0.12			
Job security	0.00	0.02	0.98	0.27	0.24	0.27**
Step 3						
Sincerity	−0.11	−1.30	0.19			
Excitement	0.01	0.16	0.87			
Competence	0.18	2.06	0.04			
Prestige	0.14	1.59	0.11			
Ruggedness	0.02	0.21	0.84	0.31	0.25	0.04

Note: Parameter estimates are for final step, not entry. Due to rounding, ΔR^2 might differ 0.01 from cumulative R^2.
**$p < 0.01$.

and organizational attributes. Whereas Lievens, Van Hoye and Schreurs (2005) found that the instrumental–symbolic framework predicted attraction to the Army in high-school students, this study indicates that these findings generalize to actual applicants pursuing a military career. From a practical point of view, the results suggest that if organizations only focus on instrumental job and organizational attributes (as is traditionally the case), an important part of what makes an organization an attractive employer is ignored.

A second key finding was that a symbolic identity dimension such as competence predicted military employees' identification with the Army. In addition, various construed external image dimensions predicted their organizational identification. However, none of the instrumental dimensions (perceived identity) emerged as a significant predictor. These results might indicate that organizational identification is more related to the pride and respect an employee feels for being a member of the organization than to material exchange (Van Dick, 2004). As another explanation, it should be noted that employees are former applicants who have not forgotten why they were attracted to the Army. In addition, they might be aware that the organization is overrated by the general population. This might explain the importance of construed external image dimensions.

Third, these findings fit within a broader model for managing multiple corporate identities, the AC²ID Test (Balmer and Greyser, 2002; Balmer and Soenen, 1999). In this model, the authors argued that corporate identity should not be considered as a monolithic entity, but instead comprises five different identities (actual, conceived, communicated, ideal, and desired). They further proposed that meaningful incongruences between any two of the five identities can cause problems for a company with its relevant stakeholders, even though slightly different identities may coexist within a company. The images that were examined in the current study (external image, perceived identity, and construed external image) show strong resemblance to the conceived identity and actual identity subtypes distinguished by Balmer and colleagues. Our findings suggest that employees' own perceptions (actual identity) were generally less favourable than their assessments of what outsiders think about the Army (conceived identity). In addition, applicants as outsiders (conceived identity) typically gave higher ratings on the image dimensions than experienced military employees did (actual identity). All of this suggests that applicants might have an optimistic view of the Army as an employer. This echoes Mael and Ashforth's (1995) statement that there exists a 'gap between a romanticized view of this profession and organization, as portrayed in fiction and drama, and the realities of the "hurry up and wait" stance required in many military jobs' (p. 324). Thus, from a practical point of view, the current study showed that the instrumental–symbolic

framework is a useful instrument for depicting the actual and conceived identity subtypes and for uncovering discrepancies between these subtypes. Therefore, the proposed framework might be an appropriate avenue for organizations to conduct image audits and to streamline their different images and identities.

Fourth, the current findings show that organizational image and organizational identity are associated with applicant attractiveness and employee identification, respectively. These are important dependent variables for understanding organizational life, as they have been found to be related to actual job pursuit (Highhouse, Lievens and Sinar, 2003), and to job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and in-role and extra-role performance (Fontenot and Scott, 2003; Riketta, 2005). Thus, our findings seem to support the notion that organizational image and identity are psychological and social realities that may have important consequences for organizations (for a recent debate on the utility of the concept 'organizational identity', see Cornelissen, 2002a, 2002b; Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2002a, 2002b; Haslam and Ellemers, 2005; Haslam, Postmes and Ellemers, 2003).

In terms of future research, more work is needed integrating the concepts of organizational identity and corporate image. In a theoretical paper, Hatch and Schultz (2000) analysed the organizational and corporate identity literatures and presented a multidimensional map, outlining how different research disciplines have tackled the organizational identity domain. Subsequently, they called for more cross-disciplinary research taking a perspective that encompasses the interests of all stakeholders including managers, customers, organization members and all other stakeholder groups. To achieve this goal, it seems necessary to develop a framework that is able to accurately depict the identities and images in all these stakeholder groups. The present study presented only a first step towards such a common framework. Future research might want to examine whether the instrumental–symbolic framework is also appropriate for examining identities and images in other stakeholder groups (e.g. customers, common citizens) and contexts other than the Army.

Furthermore, it seems worthwhile to explore other frameworks that may be useful for identifying and integrating the various components constituting organizational identity and image. For instance, Van Rekom (1998) developed a new measurement instrument to assess corporate identity. Similarly, Hatch and Schultz (2000) proposed an approach for measuring identity that is appropriate for different stakeholder groups by allowing individuals to define themselves whether they are organizational insiders/outsiders.

Future research would also benefit from taking individual and subgroup differences into account. The current study did not look into these differences and assumed that all employees were equally attracted by the same identity components. However, it is possible that organizational identity is a negotiated process where some attributes are taken on more readily than others and to a greater or lesser extent by different people (Slaughter et al., 2004).

Finally, future studies should pay attention to the dynamic aspect of organizational identity by examining how outsiders' image of the organization influences insiders' organizational identity and vice versa. Similarly, image perceptions might be temporally affected by negative publicity. Recently, Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000) have proposed that, because of the reciprocal interrelationships between identity and image, organizational identity is better viewed as a relatively fluid and unstable concept. The questionnaire-based method adopted in this study might be less appropriate to uncover these complex relationships and several researchers have proposed and developed qualitative-oriented methods for this type of research question (see Schultz, Hatch and Larsen, 2000, for examples).

A number of limitations of the study should be noted. As we relied on cross-sectional data, no strong causal conclusions can be drawn. Future research should take a longitudinal approach to investigate how initial attraction and organizational images are carried forward into employment and affect identification issues. Another limitation is that common method variance may affect our results as our results are based on self-reports gathered by a single survey. However, as noted by Mael and Ashforth (1995; see also Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004; Van Dick, 2004), studying an organization's perceived image and identity is by definition based on individuals', perceptions (the reality that they see or the reality that they socially construct), making self-reports

an adequate research approach. In addition, the different results across the samples and image dimensions show that more is happening here than just common method variance. A last limitation relates to the generalizability of our results. Our study was conducted in the Belgian Army. Hence, the specific factors that emerged as predictors of attractiveness and/or identification will not always generalize to other settings, populations and cultures. For example, in this study patriotic dimensions did not emerge as important determinants of the Army's image. This might be explained by the fact that the Belgian Army is relatively small and predominantly focuses on humanitarian and peacekeeping operations. Current recruitment campaigns are communicating this mission, with slogans such as 'Priority to Peace'. In other countries, a dimension such as the patriotic mission of the Army might be a core, enduring and distinctive attribute that influences the decision to apply for and work in the armed forces. However, it is important to note that the focus of this study was not on the specific factors but on the general framework and the broader dimensions (i.e. the distinction between instrumental and symbolic factors and the distinction between several types of image). We believe these broader dimensions will generalize to other settings. Accordingly, they constitute a fruitful area for future research on organizational and corporate identity.

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