The inside effects of a strong external employer brand

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The inside effects of a strong external employer brand: how external perceptions can influence organizational absenteeism rates

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we invoke a social identity and job resources perspective to investigate the impact of an organization's internal and external employer brand images on employee absenteeism. Specifically, using workforce samples of 56 Belgian companies ($n = 12670$) and a second independent study sample ($n = 4461$), we assess the relative importance of the internal employer brand image (i.e. employee perceptions) and the external employer brand image (i.e. non-employee perceptions) in predicting the absenteeism rate in these organizations. Results show that corporate absenteeism decreases as internal (employee) views and external (non-employee) views of the organization decline. Results further show that the external employer brand image may be a more important driver of absenteeism than the internal employer brand image. Such results highlight that an organization's external image may be a strong antecedent of important internal organizational behavior outcomes.

KEYWORDS

Employer branding; absenteeism; internal employer brand image; external employer brand image; job characteristics

Introduction

An aging workforce, increased mobility of talent and a heightened need for multi-skilled, self-managing employees, has made that companies increasingly invest in their public image and employer branding initiatives to attract and retain employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Devendorf & Highhouse, 2008; Lievens, 2007b; Minchington, 2013). These investments continue in times of recession

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with business research showing that 4 in 10 companies plan to further increase their employer branding investments in the coming year(s) (Minchington, 2013).

As a result, considerable research efforts have been devoted to defining and describing the concept of employer branding, as well as to identifying the factors that make companies attractive as employers (e.g. Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Berthon, Ewing, & Hah, 2005; Collins & Stevens, 2002; Knox & Freeman, 2006; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Roy, 2008). Employer branding, defined by Ambler and Barrow (1996) as ‘the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company’, refers to perceptions that reside in the minds of insiders (company employees) and/or outsiders (non-employees). Employer branding is thus considered as an intangible asset in the minds of existing and potential employees (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Knox & Freeman, 2006; Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Roy, 2008). So far, employer branding research has adopted three different lenses when studying the phenomenon (Maxwell & Knox, 2009): the external perspective (focusing on the perceptions of outsiders), the internal perspective (focusing on perceptions of employees), and the construed external perspective (focusing on employees’ perceptions of the perceptions of outsiders).

With some notable exceptions (e.g. Lievens, Van Hove, & Anseel, 2007; Maxwell & Knox, 2009), most of the literature has focused on the external (non-employee) perspective, and more specifically on job seekers’ and applicants’ perceptions of employer brands. Empirical work from this perspective suggests that job seekers’ behaviors mirror consumer behavior to a large extent. Just like consumers, job seekers seem to be attracted to firms based on the extent to which they believe specific job attributes are present within a company and based on the relative importance they attach to these attributes (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Job seekers also mirror the behavior of consumers in the sense that they consider both instrumental functions (e.g. remuneration and benefits) and psychological benefits (e.g. reputation and culture) when they evaluate potential employers (Lievens, 2007a).

The internal perspective on employer branding (i.e. employees’ perspective) has received somewhat less research attention than the external perspective. As suggested by Knox and Freeman (2006) and by Maxwell and Knox (2009), internal (employees’) views are, however, important to consider, given that employees act as ambassadors of the organization, and can advance the employer brand by ‘living the brand’ through their own behaviors. The few studies that have considered employee views suggest that insiders’ views and external views of the employer brand tend to differ significantly (e.g. Lievens et al., 2007; Maxwell & Knox, 2009). The insight that insiders’ and outsiders’ views on employer branding tend to differ significantly, has led scholars to the conclusion that in order to attract, motivate and retain organizations’ talents, companies should avoid a mismatch or incongruence between their external employer brand image and their internal employer brand image (Balmer & Greyser, 2002; Harold & Ployhart, 2008; Lievens et al., 2007; Moroko & Uncles, 2008; Wan-Huggins, Riordan, & Griffeth, 1998). This

conclusion suggests that in order to fully capture the employer brand, it is important to consider both insiders' and outsiders' perspectives.

In a first step toward integrating the internal and external perspectives, a third line of inquiry, focusing on the construed external employer brand (i.e. employees' perceptions of outsiders' perceptions of the employer brand) has emerged (e.g. Knox & Freeman, 2006; Lievens et al., 2007; Maxwell & Knox, 2009). This line of inquiry suggests that employees value how outsiders think of their employer and make inferences about how their employer is perceived by the outside world, which may shape their own behaviors (Knox & Freeman, 2006; Lievens et al., 2007; Maxwell & Knox, 2009).

While the construed image perspective is a first step in integrating the internal perspective and the external perspective of employer branding, one limitation of this perspective, is that it focuses on employees' *inferences* about how their employer is perceived by the outside world. To date, we know very little about the consequences of a match (or a mismatch) between insiders' (i.e. employees) and externals' *actual* perceptions of the employer brand (Lievens et al., 2007; Maxwell & Knox, 2009). Also, while research conducted from the internal and external perspectives has showed that outsiders' and insiders' perceptions of the employer brand differ significantly, an important next step is to examine the impact of an (in)congruence between internal and external perceptions on specific organizational outcomes, such as employee retention, on-the-job employee behaviors, performance, and other on-the-job behaviors such as absenteeism and citizenship (Somers, 1995).

This is an important research gap to address, given that an incongruence between internal and external perceptions is reported by 81% of employees (Conway & Briner, 2002; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Turnley & Feldman, 1999). In this study, we therefore aim to build on the work that was started by Knox and Freeman (2006), Maxwell and Knox (2009) and Lievens and colleagues (2007) by investigating how a (mis)match between the internal views and external views may impact important organizational outcomes. Specifically, we examine whether absenteeism rates within organizations are influenced by (in)congruence between the internal and external perceptions of the employer brand. We focus on absenteeism, defined as the failure to report for scheduled work (Johns, 2002), because it is considered as one of the top three HR concerns of our time (Wegge, Schmidt, Parkes, & Dick, 2007). It also represents a significant cost for companies and governments. In Europe, countries spend an average of 2.5% of the GDP on absenteeism (Edwards & Greasley, 2010). Moreover, in the popular press and books, employer branding is suggested as being a potential buffer against absenteeism (e.g. Barrow & Mosley, 2011; Harrier Human Capital, 2015), but to our knowledge, there is no empirical evidence to support this statement.

Examining the impact of the (mis)match between internal and external employer brand perceptions, also adds to the literature on absenteeism. Most of the extant absenteeism research has focused on the impact of internal policies

and perceptions on absenteeism, without much consideration of how external factors may also impact organizational absenteeism. Consistent with prior employer branding research (e.g. Maxwell & Knox, 2009), our guiding framework is social identity theory (SIT), (Tajfel, 1978), which suggests that not only internal perspectives (e.g. internal policies and employee perceptions) matter for explaining certain outcomes (e.g. absenteeism), but that also outsiders' interpretations of organizations' policies may shape how employees perceive their own workplace. That is, employees may be affected when their organization is perceived predominantly positive or negative by external observers (Fuller et al., 2006), which may be reflected in the organization's absenteeism rate. Although other theoretical lenses grounded in human, social and organizational capital theories may also prove very useful to better understand the phenomenon studied, we opted for a social identity perspective to remain consistent with previous employer branding research that has suggested that this is a suitable theoretical lens for studying employer branding in previous research (e.g. Maxwell & Knox, 2009). Maxwell and Knox (2009) note that employees' organizational identification is conceptually very close to the employer brand, as employees' identification with their organization increases, based on the attractiveness and uniqueness of the organization's identity. Also, employees' identification processes may impact the extent to which they are willing to act as ambassadors of their organization's brand (Maxwell & Knox, 2009). In the next section, we provide more details on the three theoretical lenses that have been adopted to study employer branding.

Literature

Employer branding

As noted in our introduction, three different perspectives have prevailed in the employer branding literature: the external perspective (outsiders' perceptions), the internal perspective (employee perceptions), and the construed image perspective (insiders' perceptions of outsiders' views). In this section, we highlight the main advancements that were made in the employer branding literature through the lens of these perspectives.

With regards to the dominant perspective (the external perspective), literature refers to either the external organizational image (Whetten & Mackey, 2002) or corporate reputation of an organization (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). This image captures how external stakeholders (e.g. suppliers, media, customers) perceive the organizations' past actions (Williams, Schnake, & Fredenberger, 2005) and future prospects (Fombrun, 1996) in general. When this image concerns a company's qualities as an employer, the term external employer brand image is typically used (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Collins and Stevens (2002) found that companies' employer branding practices, such as publicity, sponsorships, word-of-mouth endorsements and advertising, impacted non-employees'/outsiders' general

attitudes toward the company as well as their perceptions of various job attributes. Research also showed that job seekers are attracted to firms based on the extent to which they believe specific job attributes are present within a company and based on the relative importance they attach to these attributes (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Lievens and Highhouse (2003) found that non-employees' symbolic trait inferences about an organization (e.g. the personality, innovativeness or prestige of firms) impacted an organization's attractiveness as an employer more than job and organizational characteristics (e.g. remuneration package).

The external perspective has also resulted in a consideration of the different components that shape the employer attractiveness of potential employers. For example, Berthon, Ewing, and Hah (2005) found that the external employer brand is composed of five factors: interest value (i.e. perceptions of an exciting environment, novel work practices, employee creativity...), social value (i.e. perceptions of a fun, happy working environment, good collegial relationships, good team atmosphere...), economic value (i.e. perceptions of above-average salaries and compensation packages, job security, promotional opportunities...), development value (i.e. perceptions of career-enhancing experiences, future employment springboards, recognition, self-worth...), and application value (i.e. perceptions of opportunities to apply learnings, teach others, and of a humanitarian, customer-orientated organization...). Extending these findings to a different culture (India), Roy (2008) identified three additional components of the external employer brand: ethical value (i.e. the extent to which one perceives an employer as ethical, having a clear culture...), psychological value (i.e. the extent to which one perceives appreciation, recognition, self-confidence...), and career opportunities (i.e. the extent to which one perceives future promotional opportunities). Using a similar measurement approach that builds on Vroom's attractiveness model (1964), Knox and Freeman (2006) focused on the outcomes of employer attractiveness, and found a clear link between an attractive image and job application decisions.

As noted, far less research has focused on insiders' views of the employer brand or on the construed image that employees have of their organization's employer brand. Research focusing on insiders' perspectives or on insiders' construed employer brand image has showed that employees attach importance to potential applicants' assessment of the organization (construed external image) (Lievens et al., 2007). Extending these findings in important ways, Maxwell and Knox (2009) showed that employees not only assign considerable importance to the perceptions of applicants but also to the perceptions of other external stakeholder groups, including employees working in their industry and other groups that are perceived to influence the success of their organization.

As noted in our introduction, we believe that two important next steps would be to (1) consider outsiders' actual perceptions rather than the inferences that insiders make of their organization's employer brand; and (2) to assess whether these outsiders' actual perceptions may also influence organizational outcomes.

Given that an important implicit assumption underlying the employer branding literature is that a match between the internal and external perspectives is desirable, it is important to assess whether an (in)congruence impacts important organizational outcomes. While an (in)congruence may impact a variety of organizational outcomes, including turnover, employee satisfaction and extra-role behaviors, as mentioned, in this study we focus exclusively on absenteeism, which is defined as the failure to report for scheduled work (Johns, 2002).

The internal employer brand and absenteeism

Given that most of the extant absenteeism research starts from the implicit assumption that absenteeism is first and foremost a function of internal perceptions (i.e. employees' perceptions of their organization), we first develop our hypotheses regarding how insiders' perceptions of the employer brand may impact absenteeism. Past employer branding research conducted from the insiders' perspective has incorporated a variety of perspectives to capture insiders' perceptions of their employer brand. Maxwell and Knox (2009), showed that employees typically value the attractiveness of the employer brand of their own organization based on four dimensions: employment (e.g. rewards, management style, manager–workforce relations...), organizational successes, product, or service characteristics. Zooming in on the employment dimension, which has been the main focus within the absenteeism literature (e.g. Carmeli, 2005; Hirschfeld, Schmitt, & Bedeian, 2002), Lievens and colleagues (2007) distinguish between instrumental employment dimensions (i.e. the perceived presence of certain objective attributes such as salary and career opportunities) and symbolic employment dimensions (i.e. the perceived presence of certain subjective attributes such as ruggedness) to predict employees' and job applicants' identification with the army. Given that symbolic identity dimensions tend to be unique for each company (Lievens et al., 2007) and given that our aim is to assess the outcomes of an (in)congruence between insiders' and outsiders' perceptions for a wide variety of organizations, in this study we focus on how employees' perceptions of perceived instrumental branding dimensions impact absenteeism. To identify perceived instrumental branding dimensions, we base ourselves on the job demands–resources model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), a framework that has both been applied to the employer branding literature (e.g. Berthon, Ewing, & Hah, 2005; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Roy, 2008), and the absenteeism literature. The job demands–resources model suggests that every job consists of work and organizational factors that are divided into two general categories: demands and resources. Where job demands are the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that strain employees (e.g. poor environmental conditions or role overload), job resources are those aspects of the job that are functional in achieving work goals (e.g. career opportunities or supervisor coaching). While both jobs resources and job demands have been

found to influence absenteeism, we focus on job resources to study the internal employer brand given that job resources have been incorporated in other employer branding research (e.g. Berthon, Ewing, & Hah, 2005; Roy, 2008).

The absenteeism literature has shown that absenteeism is reduced when the following specific job resources are present: positive employee perceptions of job content (Carmeli, 2005; Hirschfeld et al., 2002), of career development (Cohen, 1991), of social atmosphere (Cortese, Colombo, & Ghislieri, 2010; Ulleberg & Rundmo, 1997), of financial rewards (Hirschfeld et al., 2002; Williams, McDaniel, & Nguyen, 2006), and of the work–life balance (Hobson, Delunas, & Kesic, 2001; Hughes & Bozionelos, 2007). Given the proven impact of these resources on absenteeism we focus on these job resources and hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: When employees evaluate the image of their organization favorably in terms of the job resources that are offered, absenteeism will decrease.

External employer brand image and absenteeism

While external perceptions have been the dominant focus in the employer branding literature, they have received very little attention in the absenteeism literature. Based on SIT, we suggest that absenteeism rates are not only a function of the employees' internal employer brand perceptions, but also of the perceptions that outsiders have of the organization (i.e. the external employer brand image). In support of our prediction, other organizational phenomena such as employees' satisfaction with pay have been demonstrated to be influenced more by employee interactions with outsiders than by the absolute pay level (Meyer & Allen, 1991). At a more general level, researchers (e.g. Ho, 2012; Tyler & Blader, 2003) have argued that employees draw a picture of their employer; they are influenced by externals as part of their social exchanges. Given that identifying the outsiders that shape employees' attitudes is difficult to achieve, we here focus on the overall external employer brand of organizations.

While there is no research that has explicitly linked the external employer brand to absenteeism rates, empirical findings within two different bodies of literature suggest the existence of such a relationship, i.e. research related to perceived external prestige and turnover research.

The external prestige literature suggests that employees' beliefs about how outsiders evaluate their employer (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) shows that the prouder an employee is of his/her employer, the more he or she will be committed and the higher his/her intention to stay (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). While employees' inferences about outsiders' perceptions of their employer may not always correspond with outsiders' actual perceptions (Knox & Freeman, 2006), research in the general corporate branding literature has suggested that an overall positive external corporate brand is also beneficial for the organization's insiders, as long as

the internal perceptions are congruent with the external corporate brand (Davies & Chun, 2002).

Also within the employee turnover literature there is evidence that employees tend to actively search for an employer with a positive external image and that this even may result in a job change, as individuals strive for positive self-esteem (Van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, & Christ, 2005). Withdrawal from a positively evaluated company is perceived as detrimental for one's self-esteem (Van Dick et al., 2004). In support of these arguments, other researchers found a negative relation between the externally perceived organizational prestige and turnover intentions (Alniacik, Cigerim, Akcin, & Bayram, 2011; Bartels, Pruyn, de Jong, & Joustra, 2007; Ciftcioglu, 2010). A longitudinal study by Mignonac, Herrbach, and Guerrero (2006) even discovered a causal relation, with perceived external prestige causing turnover intentions in three different employee samples.

Taken together, the literature on perceived external prestige and employee turnover thus suggest that, in addition to internal organizational perceptions (or the internal employer brand image), external organizational perceptions (or the external employer brand image) may also influence absenteeism rates. As highlighted before, an important limitation of the extant research is that prior research typically uses employees' opinions about how they think their organization is perceived by outsiders (i.e. the 'construed' external employer brand image) (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) to capture the organization's external reputation. However, as this approach is rather indirect and may not reflect the actual reputation that a company has, Alniacik and colleagues (2011) recommend to measure the actual perceptions of outsiders to capture the external employer brand and to assess both insiders' and outsiders' actual assessments of the employer brand. Building on these suggestions, we explore whether an (in)congruence between insiders' perceptions of the employer brand and outsiders' perceptions may drive absenteeism.

Internal and external employer brand images (in)congruence and absenteeism

When combining the internal and external employer brand images of organizations three types of comparison situations emerge: (1) a congruence situation, where internal and external perceptions are equally (un)favorable; (2) an incongruence situation, where external image is less positive than employees' internal experiences, i.e. deficiency mismatch; and, finally, (3) an incongruence situation, where external attitudes outweigh internal attitudes, i.e. excess mismatch.

We first consider a situation of congruence. Based on our SIT rationale, we expect that in organizations where there is a strong positive congruence between the internal and external employer brand images, there will be less absenteeism. Inversely, in organizations where there is a strong negative match between the internal and external employer brand images, absenteeism should be higher. We

suggest that a poor external employer brand image will amplify a poor internal brand image and, as a result, increase absenteeism. In sum, we predict:

Hypothesis 2a: In situations of congruence, absenteeism decreases as the internal employer brand image and the external employer brand image are positively assessed, and increases as the internal and external employer brand images are negatively assessed.

As already mentioned, apart from a situation of congruence, there are two possible incongruence scenarios: a deficiency situation and an excess mismatch. We first consider a deficiency situation (i.e. when employees perceive the internal situation as worse than what the external employer brand image suggests). Theorizing in the psychological contract literature (e.g. Coyle-Shapiro & Parzefall, 2008; Rousseau, 1989) suggests that employees see the outside image of the organization as a 'promise' regarding the working conditions, and that employees perceive a 'breach' when the internal situation does not live up to that external image. Empirical work within the psychological contract literature confirms that a perceived 'breach' results in a declined commitment (Conway, Guest, & Trenberth, 2011; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 1998; Kickul, 2001), lower organizational identification (Epitropaki, 2013), less in- and extra-role performance (Bordia, Restubog, Bordia, & Tang, 2010; Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo, 2007), lower satisfaction (Bunderson, 2001; Lester & Kickul, 2001; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994), and a drop in overall morale (Giacalone & Greenberg, 1997; Robinson & Greenberg, 1999). 'Breach' situations may also drive employees to balance out the equation by engaging in less productive and sometimes even contra-productive behavior and attitudes, such as neglect (Lemire & Rouillard, 2005). In some cases a breach may even result in complete job withdrawal (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002) or in an intention to leave the organization (Robinson, 1996; Zhao et al., 2007). Based on these reported detrimental effects of a mismatch between the organization's promises and the actual perceptions of the working environment, we hypothesize a similar effect related to absenteeism:

Hypothesis 2b: The more an organization's external employer brand image exceeds the internal employer brand image, the higher the organization's absenteeism rate will be.

A final internal versus external image 'comparison possibility', is an excess mismatch (i.e. an incongruence situation where a company is perceived more positively by insiders than by outsiders). Psychological contract theory suggests two possible scenarios in excess situations. A first, traditional psychological contract view predicts that any deviation from fulfillment will be detrimental (Robinson, 1996; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994), suggesting that a situation of excess (and also deficiency) will be perceived negatively by employees. An alternative, more recent view (e.g. Lambert, Edwards, & Cable, 2003) suggests that excesses can also be perceived positively. For example, when employees are paid more than expected, this may have positive consequences (Edwards, Caplan, & Harrison, 1998).

The few studies that have examined the impact of excess provide support for both views. Some authors observed positive effects of excess on organizational outcomes such as organizational commitment (Castaing, 2006;), daily mood and the feeling of being taken care of (Conway & Briner, 2002; Zottoli, 2003), and loyalty (Chaudhry, Wayne, & Schalk, 2009). Others observed that excess creates stress and anxiety (Kossek, Roberts, Fisher, & Demarr, 1998; Kreiner, 2006). To reconcile these mixed results, Lambert and colleagues (2003) argue that the outcome depends on the type of excess factors being studied and the context in which these factors are provided. This conclusion is in line with Warr's vitamin model (1987), which predicts that the excess of some job characteristics (e.g. salary, task significance) have a positive effect, and others (e.g. autonomy, task variety) have a negative effect on employee outcomes. As an 'excess' of the job components examined in this study (career development, job content, social atmosphere, financial rewards, and work-life balance) has been demonstrated to have positive effects on employee satisfaction (cf. Irving & Montes, 2009; Lambert et al., 2003), we expect a similar positive 'excess' effect related to absenteeism:

Hypothesis 2c: The more an organization's internal employer brand image exceeds the external employer brand image in terms of positive attitude, the lower absenteeism rates will be.

Method

Sample and procedure

Given that we sought to assess how both internal and external employer brand perceptions affect employees' absenteeism, two independent samples were used to collect the data, an 'internal' sample and an 'external' sample. The 'internal' sample ($n = 12,670$) was collected from 56 organizations that participated in the Great Place to Work research, a large-scale study that assesses the work climate in a wide variety of manufacturing and service organizations. These organizations employed between 80 and 16,000 employees. Within each organization, a random sample was selected, varying from 50 employees in companies with less than 100 employees, 300 employees in mid-sized companies, up to 1500 employees in the largest companies. The selected employees were asked to fill out a survey during regular working hours regarding their experiences within their organization.

As noted, prior research has generally used incumbent employees' opinions about how they think their organization is perceived by outsiders (i.e. the 'constructed' external employer brand image) (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Following Alniacik and colleagues' (2011) suggestions to use an actual externally measured image in order to enrich the validity of findings in this study we invited an 'external' sample ($n = 5039$) of readers of a leading Belgian recruitment magazine to participate in a study on employer branding. All companies under assessment were either large Belgian companies or international companies with a major

Table 1. Overview of the internal and external assessments for every company included.

	Internal employer brand (<i>n</i> = 12,670)	External employer brand (<i>n</i> = 4461)
Company 1	211	72
Company 2	99	31
Company 3	262	38
Company 4	199	79
Company 5	170	11
Company 6	235	101
Company 7	357	22
Company 8	208	117
Company 9	67	292
Company 10	200	71
Company 11	166	62
Company 12	168	21
Company 13	242	14
Company 14	159	99
Company 15	157	69
Company 16	170	160
Company 17	271	138
Company 18	199	27
Company 19	113	123
Company 20	208	30
Company 21	192	15
Company 22	183	16
Company 23	194	31
Company 24	175	19
Company 25	382	164
Company 26	73	19
Company 27	459	237
Company 28	167	11
Company 29	141	17
Company 30	210	27
Company 31	196	157
Company 32	151	130
Company 33	174	10
Company 34	208	73
Company 35	166	30
Company 36	208	54
Company 37	634	141
Company 38	182	172
Company 39	279	94
Company 40	180	36
Company 41	333	30
Company 42	70	52
Company 43	1085	44
Company 44	305	91
Company 45	132	38
Company 46	193	26
Company 47	154	205
Company 48	291	50
Company 49	307	301
Company 50	176	22
Company 51	192	33
Company 52	107	14
Company 53	132	25
Company 54	312	13
Company 55	174	475
Company 56	292	12

office in Belgium. To ensure valid responses, only the answers of respondents that indicated to sufficiently know the company assessed to evaluate the company as an employer (e.g. by accounts of family, acquaintances, or through industry or

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of respondents.

		Internal sample (<i>n</i> = 13,220) (%)	External sample (<i>n</i> = 4474) (%)
Gender	Female	44.8	48.2
	Males	55.2	51.8
Age	Less than 25y	11.7	12.6
	25y–34y	31.4	46.2
	35y–44y	31.3	24.1
	45y–54y	20.5	13.6
	55y and older	5.2	3.5
Function type	White-collar employee	73.2	73.6
	Line management	21.4	19.2
	Senior management	5.3	4.2
	Self-employed	0	3.0

market knowledge), were taken into account. Of all participants, 1361 persons indicated to know one or more of the 56 companies, and evaluated on average 3.3 companies on perceived job content, career development, social atmosphere, financial rewards, and work–life balance, resulting in 4461 company assessments.

An overview of the spread of internal and external assessments for every company is presented in Table 1. For organizations with fewer external assessments, and following recommendations by LeBreton and Senter (2007), interrater reliability and interrater agreement were calculated to support inclusion in the sample. Results corroborate the inclusion of the present 56 organizations.

As highlighted by Table 2, which summarizes the sample structure of both our internal and external samples, the two samples were very similar in their composition. Only for the age distribution (and more specifically for the age categories between 25 and 54), there was some heterogeneity between the two samples. However, we believe it is unlikely that the heterogeneity within this age category might have affected our results. Research in the psychological contract literature has shown that within this age category, there are very little differences in terms of the psychological contract toward the employer. Age differences, however, do explain psychological contracts between this category and young graduates (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010) or older workers (Van Tilborg, Dries, De Vos, & Bal, 2014) – both of which were equally represented in both samples.

Measures

To measure the attractiveness of employer brands (or assess the internal and/or external employer brand image) previous literature (e.g. Berthon, Ewing, and Hah, 2005; Roy, 2008) has proposed specific job/employer characteristics, identified in another literature stream as job resources (Demerouti et al., 2001). As mentioned in our theory section, we adopt a similar approach.

Internal employer brand perceptions

The measures used were based on previous research by De Vos, Buyens, and Schalk (2003), that distinguishes five factors that can be used to investigate employer quality: job content, career development, social atmosphere, financial rewards, and work–life balance. Given that data were collected as a part of the Great Place to Work research, the research team used proxy items derived from the standardized Great Place to Work instrument to assess employees' internal perceptions regarding the presence of these five job characteristics. Three independent experts assessed the standardized instrument and selected those items that pertained to the five job characteristics we sought to examine. The financial rewards item that was selected is 'People here are paid fairly for the work they do', the item pertaining to social atmosphere is 'This is a friendly place to work'. For work–life balance, we chose to select 'People are encouraged to balance their work life and their personal life'. For job content, the item 'Jobs have special meaning: they aren't "just a job"' was found most adequate, whereas career development was measured by 'Promotions go to those who deserve them'. Respondents rated the extent to which they perceived these characteristics to be present in their workplace on a five-point Likert scale (1 = 'not at all'; 5 = 'very much'). In a next step, the five factors were aggregated into an employer inducement scale, congruent with the tradition of measuring the psychological contract by aggregating different factors to a global inducements measure (e.g. Coyle-Shapiro, 2002; Turnley & Feldman, 1999). Confirmatory factor analysis supported aggregation into one employer inducement scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .807$).

External employer brand perceptions

To assess the external employer brand image the same five job characteristics (job content, career opportunities, social atmosphere, financial rewards, and work–life balance) and Likert scale measures (1 = 'not at all'; 5 = 'very much') were used, with the request to indicate the extent to which each job characteristic in the opinion of the respondent was present in the organization under investigation. Next, the items were again aggregated into one employer inducement scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .670$).

Absenteeism

Absenteeism was measured at the organizational level. Organizations were instructed to draw absenteeism data from their personnel records from the past 12 months. Next, they were asked to divide the total number of absent days by the number of present days to calculate the absenteeism ratio per employee. This ratio was used to calculate a yearly average aggregate ratio that expresses the absenteeism of the entire employee population, and not solely of the employees that participated in the study. The absenteeism ratios reported range between .50% and 15.49% (mean: 3.69; sd.: 2.51).

Analysis

We first ran a confirmatory factor analyses to test the robustness of our scales. This analysis showed significant consistency of the internal image scale, with all items loading on one factor (with factor loadings $>.500$). As for the external image, three out of five factor loadings proved to be sufficiently high ($>.500$), while the factor loadings of atmosphere and work–life balance were relatively low (below $.200$). As such, we ran two versions of our analyses: one with all the items for the external image and one without the two items with low factor loadings. Given that these analyses yielded very similar results and given our intent to measure both the internal and external images with similar and commonly accepted scales, we decided to proceed with the full scales.

To test the hypotheses, the data were analyzed using polynomial regression. This approach has significant advantages compared to traditional ‘difference scores’ methods used for matching hypotheses. This traditional method consists of calculating the algebraic difference between two measures (e.g. the employee’s view of an employer minus the job seeker’s view of the employer). However, Edwards (1994) stressed severe methodological problems related to this approach, as the method collapses two predictor variables into one single score (see also Cronbach, 1958, 1992; Johns, 1981). As a consequence the relationship between the predictor and dependent variables from which the difference scores are derived remains hidden. This can be avoided using polynomial regressions, which view both predictor variables and the outcome as three distinct constructs with separate measures (Edwards & Parry, 1993). Furthermore, using polynomial regression allows to not only investigate the joint effect of the internal and external employer brand images on absenteeism, but also to differentiate between congruence, deficiency, and excess situations.

To reduce the risk of multicollinearity, we centered the control and predictor variables around the midpoint of their respective scales before conducting the analyses (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003; Edwards, 1994). We used polynomial regression to estimate the quadratic regression equation, using absenteeism as the dependent variable and the employer inducements scale to measure both the external and the internal employer brand image. More specifically, the hypotheses were tested using multiple regression, regressing absenteeism (outcome) on five control variables, i.e. sector, size of the company, employee age, employee seniority, and employee function type (Model 1); the main effects of external and internal employer brand images (Model 2); and the cross-product of external and internal employer brand images, the square of external and the square of internal employer brand images (Model 3). When the R^2 increases significantly in the last step, and when individual higher order terms are significant, the relationship between the dependent and independent variables is nonlinear and can be evaluated through the use of response surface analysis (Edwards, 2002). In this study, we used the excel spreadsheet program from Shanock, Baran, Gentry, Pattison, and Heggstad (2010) to create a three-dimensional image that visually represents the combined

relationship of external and internal employer brands on absenteeism (outcome). The interpretation of this graph is based on four surface test values: $a_1 (= b_1 + b_2)$, $a_2 (= b_3 + b_4 + b_5)$, $a_3 (= b_1 - b_2)$, and $a_4 (= b_3 - b_4 + b_5)$.

Results

Means, standard deviations, reliability estimates, and correlations for all measures are reported in Table 3. Results show a significant and negative correlation between the internal assessment of employer brand image and absenteeism. The external employer brand image and absenteeism show a negative, insignificant relation. In addition, the internal employer brand image is not significantly related to the external one. Alpha coefficients are .670 and .807, indicating a good validity of the scales.

Direct effect of internal employer brand image on absenteeism

Hypothesis 1 suggests that the absenteeism rate of an organization will decrease as the employer is more positively assessed internally. This hypothesis was supported by a significant positive correlation between the two variables ($r = -.345, p < .05$) and when examined via hierarchical regression after accounting for the control variables (see Step 2 of Table 4: $\beta = -.444, p < .01$).

Joint effect of internal and external employer brand images on absenteeism

Hypotheses 2a–2c propose that congruence and incongruence situations between internal and external employer brand images would have a distinct impact on the absenteeism rate of an organization. To assess these hypotheses, we followed the procedures of polynomial regression analyses and response surface analyses.

Table 5 reports the results of the polynomial regression analyses. A model consisting only of control variables (i.e. sector, company size, employee age, employee seniority, and employee function type) predicts only 16.0% of the variance in employee absenteeism (Model 1). Adding independent variables (i.e. internal and external images) significantly increases the explanatory power to 39.8% (Model 2). The external employer brand image contributed slightly less to employee absenteeism as the internal employer brand image, as shown in the magnitude of the coefficients ($\beta = .336$ and $\beta = .458$, respectively). The regression analysis revealed a significant increase in R^2 and a significant higher order effect (Model 3), allowing us to use surface analysis to further investigate the effect of the relation between internal and external employer brand images on absenteeism.

Edwards (1994, 1996, 2001) recommend interpreting the surface corresponding to the quadratic equation. Figure 1(a) and (b) represents the three-dimensional surfaces of the polynomial regression. We differentiate between a congruence situation (Hypothesis 2a), and an incongruence situation of deficiency (Hypothesis 2b) and excess (Hypothesis 2c).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and correlations of study items.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Job content (internal)	4.134	.203	(.807)									
2. Career development (internal)	3.378	.366	.562**	(.807)								
3. Social atmosphere (internal)	4.040	.309	.628**	.540**								
4. Financial rewards (internal)	3.590	.356	.461**	.644**	(.807)							
5. Work-life balance (internal)	3.641	.343	.284*	.480**	.507**	.508**						
6. Job content (external)	3.864	.188	.013	.031	.108	-.182	.038	(.670)				
7. Career development (external)	3.976	.267	-.019	.117	-.115	-.013	-.076	.713**	(.670)			
8. Social atmosphere (external)	3.767	.241	.028	.002	.015	-.035	-.145	.013	.174	(.670)		
9. Financial rewards (external)	3.811	.269	-.003	.031	-.158	.092	.066	.503**	.703**	-.060	(.670)	
10. Work-life balance (external)	3.509	.323	.058	-.295*	-.108	-.122	.122	-.064	-.078	.214	.091	(.670)

Note: Chronbach's alpha values for the internal and external employer brand scales between brackets.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table 4. Hierarchical regression examining the impact of internal employer image on absenteeism.

Variables		Absenteeism	
		1	2
Step 1			
	Sector	-.065	-.056
	Company size	.387*	.443*
	Employee age	-.090	-.116
	Employee seniority	.022	-.146
	Function type (white-collar)	-.140	.099
	Function type (line mgmt)	-.372	-.146
	Function type (senior mgmt)	-.217	-.188
Step 2			
	Internal employer image (<i>I</i>)		-.444**
	<i>F</i>	1.140	2.258*
	<i>F</i> change		8.630**
	<i>R</i> ²	.160	.306
	<i>R</i> ² change		.146**

Note: Standardized β -coefficients are reported.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Table 5. Hierarchical regression examining the impact of internal employer image and external employer image on absenteeism.

Variables		Absenteeism		
		1	2	3
Step 1				
	Sector	-.065	-.100	.050
	Company size	.387*	.506**	.356*
	Employee age	-.090	.019	.119
	Employee seniority	.022	-.242	-.241
	Function type (white-collar)	-.140	.284	.541
	Function type (line mgmt)	-.372	.064	.367
	Function type (senior mgmt)	-.217	-.063	.029
Step 2				
	Internal employer image (<i>I</i>)		-.458**	-1.056
	External employer image (<i>E</i>)		-.336*	-3.930***
Step 3				
	<i>I</i> ²			-1.438*
	<i>E</i> ²			2.315**
	<i>I</i> $\times$ <i>E</i>			2.276**
	<i>F</i>	1.140	2.934**	4.530***
	<i>F</i> change		7.899**	6.011**
	<i>R</i> ²	.160	.398	.595
	<i>R</i> ² change		.238**	.197**
	Linear shape along <i>I</i> = <i>E</i>		$a_1 = b_1 + b_2 = -73.62^{**}$	
	Curvilinear shape along <i>I</i> = <i>E</i>		$a_2 = b_3 + b_4 + b_5 = 42.69^{**}$	
	Linear shape along <i>I</i> = - <i>E</i>		$a_3 = b_1 - b_2 = 50.42^{**}$	
	Curvilinear shape along <i>I</i> = - <i>E</i>		$a_4 = b_3 - b_4 + b_5 = -12.54$	

Note: Standardized β -coefficients are reported. a_1 and a_2 represent the slope of each surface along the *I* = *E* line, while a_3 and a_4 represent the slope of each surface along the *I* = -*E* line, where b_1, b_2, b_3, b_4 , and b_5 are the unstandardized coefficients on *I*, *E*, *I*², *I* $\times$ *E*, and *E*², respectively.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

First, for the congruence situation, we draw an imaginary line of congruence or perfect agreement (*I* = *E*). The slope of this line (a_1) indicates how agreement between the two predictor variables relates to an outcome, while the curvature

Figure 1. 3D representations of the polynomial regression.

(a_2) expresses whether this relation is linear or curvilinear. Hypothesis 2a proposes that congruency between the internal employer brand image and the external employer brand image will impact absenteeism such that the higher both internal and external employer brand images are valued, the lower the absenteeism rate will be. Consistent with this hypothesis, absenteeism decreased as values along the $I = E$ line increased from both being negative toward both being neutral ($I = 0$ and $E = 0$). However, when we move further along to $I = E$ line away from neutral scores toward the highest scores, we find that absenteeism increased again. Absenteeism was higher when internal and external employer brand images were both high or both low, than when both were neutral. Slope analysis confirms what

Table 6. Hierarchical regression examining internal employer image as mediator.

		Absenteeism	
Variables		1	2
Step 1			
	Sector	-.065	-.108
	Company size	.387*	.445*
	Employee age	-.090	.039
	Employee seniority	.022	-.063
	Function type (white-collar)	-.140	.028
	Function type (line mgmt)	-.372	-.179
	Function type (senior mgmt)	-.217	-.099
Step 2			
	External employer image (<i>E</i>)		-.319*
	<i>F</i>	1.140	1.642
	<i>F</i> change		4.491
	<i>R</i> ²	.160	.243
	<i>R</i> ² change		.083
		Internal employer image	
		1	2
Step 1			
	Sector	-.015	-.014
	Company size	.077	.075
	Employee age	-.074	-.077
	Employee seniority	-.389	-.387
	Function type (white-collar)	.550	.545
	Function type (line mgmt)	.582	.576
	Function type (senior mgmt)	.086	.083
Step 2			
	External employer image (<i>E</i>)		.010
	<i>F</i>	2.758*	2.365*
	<i>F</i> change		.005
	<i>R</i> ²	.279	.279
	<i>R</i> ² change		.005

Note: Standardized β -coefficients are reported.* $p < .05$.**Table 7.** Hierarchical regression examining external employer image as moderator.

		Absenteeism	
		1	2
Step 1			
	Sector	-.065	-.151
	Company size	.387*	.579**
	Employee age	-.090	.111
	Employee seniority	.022	-.366
	Function type (white-collar)	-.140	.461
	Function type (line mgmt)	-.372	.195
	Function type (senior mgmt)	-.217	.013
Step 2			
	Internal employer image (<i>I</i>)		-1.623**
	External employer image (<i>E</i>)		-1.183**
	<i>I</i> $\times$ <i>E</i>		1.374
	<i>F</i>	1.140	3.247**
	<i>F</i> change		7.018**
	<i>R</i> ²	.160	.454
	<i>R</i> ² change		.295**

Note: Standardized β -coefficients are reported.* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

the visual diagram represents; the shape along the $I = E$ line has a significant curvilinear shape, i.e. convex, given the positive value of a_2 ($a_2 = 42.69, p < .01$). Note that the slope of the first principal axis (low to neutral) is greater than the slope of the second principal axis (neutral to high), indicating a more severe impact on absenteeism when internal and external images are both perceived negatively than when perceived highly positively. In combination, these results provide partial support for Hypothesis 2a.

Second, for the incongruence situation, we investigate a similar imaginary line, namely one of perfect incongruence ($I = -E$). Again, we investigate the slope (a_3) and curvature (a_4). Hypothesis 2b suggests that when the external employer brand image exceeds the internal one, absenteeism will be high. Absenteeism is expected to be lower for mid-range results where the discrepancy is small, and Hypothesis 2c suggests that when the internal employer brand image exceeds the external one, absenteeism will be at the lowest level. When we move along the $I = -E$ line from the left-hand corner to the midpoint of the response surface, the negative external employer brand image improves and we move toward a point where it matches the internal employer brand image ($I = 0, E = 0$). We observe that along this stretch of the $I = -E$ line absenteeism increased instead of decreased as was expected from Hypothesis 2b. Thus, when the external employer brand image is more favorable than the internal employer brand image, absenteeism is low.

When we continue and move along the $I = -E$ line from the center to the right-hand corner of the response surface, the external employer brand image is surpassing the internal employer brand image. Contrary to what was hypothesized in Hypothesis 2c, we found that absenteeism continued to increase. These results indicate that absenteeism is higher when the discrepancy is such that the external employer brand image is perceived less favorably than the internal one, and absenteeism will be lower when the discrepancy is such that the external employer brand image is perceived more favorably than the internal one. Slope analysis confirms the visual diagram; the shape along the $I = -E$ has a significant linear shape ($a_3 = 50.42, p < .01$) and an insignificant curvilinear shape ($a_4 = -12.54, p > .05$). We conclude from these observations that Hypothesis 2c is not supported.

To exclude alternative explanations of the relationship between internal and external employer brand images and its impact on absenteeism, and in further support of the robustness of above results, we conducted additional analyses.

First, one might argue that the external employer brand image impacts how employees experience their organization on the inside, which then is translated in their absenteeism behavior. Here, the formation of the internal employer brand image is seen as a process (i.e. a mediator) via which the external employer brand image is integrated and impacts absenteeism. To assess whether the internal employer brand image mediates the relationship between external employer brand image and absenteeism, we followed a multi-step procedure (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Although we could establish a significant relationship between external employer brand image and absenteeism (Table 6, Step 2: $\beta = -.319, p < .05$), we

did not observe a necessary significant relationship between external employer brand image and internal employer brand image, needed to confirm mediation (Table 6, Step 2: $\beta = .010$, $p > .05$). A Sobel test of the indirect effect ($z = .98$, $p > .05$) provided further evidence for the nonexistence of a mediating relationship.

Second, in observing absenteeism as an outcome of the interaction of the internal employer brand image and the external employer brand image, one can assume that the external employer brand image would function to moderate the link between internal employer brand image and absenteeism. In this case, the external employer brand image may act as a shield or an amplifier of the internal employer brand image employees have. However, the interaction effect of external employer brand image was insignificant (Table 7, Step 2: $\beta = 1.374$, $p > .05$).

These additional analyses provide further evidence for the results depicted above, and support the complex relationships among the variables. They also provide advocate for the use of polynomial regression analysis as the most appropriate technique for testing the hypotheses suggested.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship of the external and internal employer brand image with absenteeism. Our results demonstrate that, when solely taking into account internal factors, a positive internal assessment of job characteristics (i.e. the operationalization used to measure internal employer brand image) is positively related to a reduced absenteeism. Consistent with research on turnover intentions (e.g. Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2003; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) our results highlight that organizations that provide working conditions that are internally perceived as positive by their employees have lower absenteeism ratios. However, when taking into account the perceived external employer brand image, we find that the effect of the internal employer brand image is overshadowed by how external parties view the organization. Regardless of the perceived internal situation, absenteeism rates are lower in organizations that have a strong external employer brand.

Contributions

Taken together, we add to the existing literature by directly investigating how the internal and external employer brand images impact important organizational outcomes such as absenteeism. While previous research has already shown that the construed employer brand (i.e. insiders' perceptions of how external parties assess their organization) impacts employee behavior (e.g. Balmer & Greyser, 2002; Lievens et al., 2007; Maxwell & Knox, 2009), our study shows that also *actual* external perceptions influence important outcomes. We thus expand the current literature by comparing both the internal and external perceptions of employer brand image. Due to advanced measurements and statistical methods, such as

polynomial regression we were able to discuss congruence, deficiency, and excess comparisons between the external and internal employer brand image.

Second, this research adds to SIT, by going beyond direct effects of external employer brand image and perform comparisons between the internal and external images of an employer. The fact that when the internal brand was better than the external brand related to higher absenteeism rates, while situations where the external employer brand image exceeded the internal views, absenteeism rates were lower, suggest that the external employer brand image of an organization may serve as an important buffer for absenteeism. Though somewhat unexpected from an absenteeism perspective which has focused predominantly on the internal perspective, these results can be explained by SIT, which suggests that employees are not only driven by employees' own perceptions of their organization, but also by the perceptions of outsiders (Maxwell & Knox, 2009). Future research should explore whether our results can be extended to outcomes other than absenteeism. That is, will a strong external employer brand also reduce employees' turnover intentions, regardless of the internal image? This is an important research question to assess in future research as the common assumption is that an inflated external brand that is not consistent with the internal employer brand may lead to the perception of the breach of the psychological contract (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Such violations of the psychological contract, which can be defined as an employee's belief that the organization sticks to its promises, have been shown to increase turnover and intentions to quit, reduced job satisfaction, reduced organizational trust, and decreased job performance (see also Robinson, Kraatz, & Rousseau, 1994; Robinson & Morrison, 1995; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Given that the general assumption is that a realistic job preview and adequate and honest employer branding messages are important, it is important to test our model with different outcomes. For example, it could be that while the external employer image is an important buffer against absenteeism for employees that have no desire to leave, it may be a less important buffer against turnover.

Third, previous research has almost exclusively used self-reporting measures of absenteeism. This practice has been criticized in the last couple of years as a number of researchers discussed the limitations of self-reporting measures (Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2006; Turnley, Bolino, Lester, & Bloodgood, 2003; Turnley & Feldman, 2000). For example, Schalk and van Rijckevorsel (2007) indicate that asking employees about their absenteeism always results in an underestimation. Our study contributes to this new body of research using company personnel records as an objective measure of employee absenteeism. Our results show that the relation between the discrepancy of internal and external employer brand images and absenteeism is linear (following the line of incongruence). This linearity supports the direct relationship between internal employer brand image and absenteeism we observed when testing hypothesis 1 and is aligned with previous theorizing in empower branding literature (Lievens et al., 2007; Maxwell & Knox, 2009). However, interestingly, in the congruence situation, a convex relationship

occurs, indicating that when both images (internal and external) are favorable (as opposed to neutral), absenteeism increases again. These results seem to suggest that in the situation where both the internal and external employer brand images are favorable, employees start 'slacking off'. A possible explanation for this phenomenon can be found in goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990), which states that goals are associated with enhanced performance and decreased absenteeism. Our data describe a situation where employees are unable to improve themselves both from an internal and an external perspective. As a result a state of 'goal deprivation' could occur, thus causing an increase in absenteeism (Latham & Locke, 1979).

Limitations

Aside from the contributions, our research has limitations that should be taken in to account when interpreting the findings. The job characteristics studied were aggregated into one inducement scale, in line with the tradition in previous research (e.g. Coyle-Shapiro, 2002; Turnley & Feldman, 2000). This is common practice due to the conceptual overlap that occurs between these different job characteristics (Lambert, Edwards, & Cable, 2003). Moreover, given our theoretical aim to assess the interplay between internal and external employer brand perceptions in impacting absenteeism rates, for this study, it was less relevant to study job characteristics as separate factors. Nevertheless, future research may fruitfully do so.

A second limitation is related to the general nature of the absenteeism outcome variable studied. Although it was a deliberate decision to use a general, widely accepted measure of corporate absenteeism to test the impact of the internal and external employer brand images for the first time, different subdimensions of absenteeism can also be considered. For example, Fitzgibbons and Moch (1980) differentiated between 'excused nonsickness-related absenteeism', 'excused sickness-related absenteeism', and 'unexcused absenteeism' (Fitzgibbons & Moch, 1980). Future research should attempt to separate the different types of absenteeism in organizations, and assess how the internal and external employer brand images impact them. In addition to considering different absenteeism types, it may also be worthwhile to study specific elements related to absenteeism (e.g. frequency and duration), as these might be related to different antecedents (Bakker, Demerouti and Schaufeli 2003). Moreover, future research could also include turnover intentions as a mediator between the employer brand image and absenteeism, given that turnover intentions have been identified as an important driver of absenteeism rates.

Another limitation of our study is that we exclusively focused on absenteeism rates. Given the attention in current literature for the relationship between employer branding and employee retention as organizational outcome variables (e.g. Knox & Freeman, 2006; Lievens, 2007a; Maxwell & Knox, 2009), it would be

worthwhile to study employee retention as a mediator in the relationship between employer brand image and absenteeism. This would link retention to an on-the-job employee behavior.

The generalization of our results may also be limited due to the selected job characteristics. We used the validated five factor model of De Vos and colleagues (2003). This measure focuses only on functional benefits, or the tangible, objective terms of an employment relation. Even though this is in line with previous research (e.g. Cable & Graham, 2000; Turban, 2001), future studies should also look at symbolic benefits when investigating the employer images. These are the intangible, abstract, and subjective perceptions that constitute an organizational personality, e.g. sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). As this study demonstrates that the behavior of employees can be strongly influenced by the external employer brand image, we share the opinion of Maxwell and Knox (2009), who indicate that it may be fruitful (and of managerial relevance) to conduct further research to identify the sources of information that employees use to construe their organization's external image. As noted by these authors, the literature would, for example, benefit greatly from also including factors that go beyond pure job factors, such as for example the overall financial success of the organization.

Even though we consider the use of an external view on employer brand image as a strength of this study, we could have added an incumbent perception of external prestige (i.e. the construed internal image). Given that the survey instrument we used to assess internal brand perceptions was part of a standardized project (Great Place to Work), we could not add the construed employer brand to our study variables. While we believe that our test is an even more robust test of the impact of the external image (as assessed by real outsiders), future research would benefit from an assessment of how the external image corresponds with the construed image that employees have of their external brand. In doing so, research may also incorporate other theoretical lenses. One theoretical lens that might shed new light on employer branding research is social and human capital theory, which refers to the goodwill and resources made available to an actor via reciprocal, trusting relationships and which is thought to be derived from both intra- and extra-organizational relationships, and more in particular by employment practices (Leana & Van Buren, 1999; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

Managerial implications

Our study also has important managerial implications. The results of this study indicate that regardless of the perceived internal situation, when an employer is perceived more favorably by external stakeholders, absenteeism in that organization will be lower. Organizations that want to decrease absenteeism can thus do so by investing in demonstrating favorable job conditions to external audiences – or in other words: attempt to create a strong and internally visible external

employer brand. Our results demonstrate that absenteeism will be reduced by the positive identity that incumbent employees will draw from being identified with a well-perceived employer by the outside world. There are many ways in which organizations can influence their external employer brand. Determining the most suitable branding approach for a specific organization is highly dependent on the organization's characteristics and circumstances. Just like there is no universal approach to corporate branding (Ind, 1997), there is also no universal approach to employer branding. In any case, it is clear from our study that branding efforts may have far-going effects that even are reflected in employee absenteeism rates. Organizations should be aware that employer external branding practices have these 'internal' effects. Incorporating an HR manager in the corporate brand management team may be a way to ensure the relevance and distinctiveness of the employer brand toward incumbent employees.

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