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Employer branding in the Belgian Army: The importance of instrumental and symbolic beliefs for potential applicants, actual applicants, and military employees

Filip LIEVENS
Singapore Management University, filiplievens@smu.edu.sg

Citation

EMPLOYER BRANDING IN THE BELGIAN ARMY: THE IMPORTANCE OF INSTRUMENTAL AND SYMBOLIC BELIEFS FOR POTENTIAL APPLICANTS, ACTUAL APPLICANTS, AND MILITARY EMPLOYEES

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This study conceptualizes employer brand as a package of instrumental and symbolic attributes. Using a sample of 955 individuals (429 potential applicants, 392 actual applicants, and 134 military employees), we examine the relative importance of instrumental and symbolic employer brand beliefs across different groups of individuals: potential applicants, actual applicants, and military employees (with less than three years of tenure). Results show that instrumental attributes explain greater variance in the Army's attractiveness as an employer among actual applicants compared to potential applicants or employees. In all three groups, symbolic trait inferences explain a similar portion of the variance. In addition, in all three groups, symbolic trait inferences explain incremental variance over and above instrumental attributes. Implications for employer branding practices and image audits are discussed. © 2007 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Employer branding, or employer brand management, involves internally and externally promoting a clear view of what makes a firm different and desirable as an employer (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Cable & Turban, 2001). According to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), employer branding is essentially a three-step process. First, a firm develops a concept of the particular value it offers to prospective and current employees. This value proposition provides the central message that is conveyed by the employer brand. It is of key importance that this value proposition derives from a thorough audit of the characteristics that make the firm a great place to work. Once the value proposition is determined, the second step in employer brand-

Correspondence to: Filip Lievens, Dept. of Personnel Management and Work and Organizational Psychology, Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Ghent University, Belgium, Phone: +32 9 264 64 53, Fax: + 32 9 264 64 94, E-mail: filip.lievens@ugent.be

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ing consists of externally marketing this value proposition to attract the targeted applicant population. The third step of employer branding involves carrying the brand "promise" made to recruits into the firm and incorporating it as part of the organizational culture. In other words, this last step consists of internally marketing the employer brand.

Although employer branding has become a popular topic in the HR practitioner literature (e.g., Frook, 2001), empirical research is still relatively scarce (Cable & Turban, 2001). A first group of studies (Highhouse, Zickar, Thorsteinson, Stierwalt, & Slaughter, 1999; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Lievens, Van Hoye, & Schreurs, 2005; Slaughter, Zickar, Highhouse, & Mohr, 2004) focused on the first step in employer branding. Generally, these studies documented the importance of carefully determining and auditing the factors that make firms attractive employers. Another study (Collins & Stevens, 2002) concentrated on the second step in employer branding. This study discovered that organizations could externally market their employer brand by using various early recruitment practices. A last group of studies investigated the consequences of employer branding. Evidence showed that a strong employer brand positively affected the pride that individuals expected from organizational membership (Cable & Turban, 2003), applicant pool quantity and quality (Collins & Han, 2004), and firm performance advantages over the broad market (Fulmer, Gerhart, & Scott, 2003).

The current study focuses on the image audit step of the employer branding process because it is the basis on which the other steps develop. Given the key role of the image audit step, it should incorporate important stakeholder beliefs about the characteristics of an attractive employer. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the relative importance of different aspects of employer brand beliefs across different

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groups of individuals ranging from the general labor pool to actual applicants and current employees. This study contributes to prior research on image audits because it is the first that examines employer brand beliefs across such diverse groups of individuals—namely, potential applicants, actual applicants, and military employees.

The context of this study is the Belgian Army. Similar to other armed forces, the Belgian Army faces both recruitment and retention challenges. As in many other European countries, the importance of being an attractive employer has been bolstered by the recent transition from compulsory to voluntary military service. Apart from these similarities, the Belgian Army is relatively small in comparison with other countries. Another potential difference is that the Belgian Army mainly focuses on humanitarian and peacekeeping operations. Current recruitment campaigns are communicating this mission, as exemplified by slogans such as "Priority to Peace."

Study Background

The Content of Employer Brand Beliefs

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." The basic premise that people associate both *instrumental* functions and *psychological (symbolic)* benefits with a brand is well supported in the marketing literature (Katz, 1960; Keller, 1993, 1998; Shavitt, 1990). Instrumental benefits correspond to product-related attributes. These describe the product in terms of its objective, physical, and tangible attributes. Katz (1960) linked instrumental attributes to people's basic need to maximize benefits and minimize costs. For example, consumers want to buy a car because it provides them with instrumental functions such as transportation, protection, comfort, and safety.

Applied to a recruitment context, instrumental attributes describe the job or organi-

zation in terms of the objective, concrete, and factual attributes inherent in a job or organization (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). These attributes primarily trigger interest among applicants because of their utility (i.e., maximizing benefits and minimizing costs). In the context of the Army, instrumental characteristics might refer to pay and benefits, or the opportunities to travel abroad and engage in physical activities.

Conversely, symbolic meanings correspond to non-product-related attributes, especially user imagery (Keller, 1998). Here, the product is described in terms of subjective, abstract, and intangible attributes that accrue from how people perceive a product and make inferences about it. 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; Highhouse, Thornbury, & Little, in press; Katz, 1960; Shavitt, 1990). For instance, consumers desire a particular car because it appears cool and trendy, and these traits may reflect their self-concept.

Applied to a recruitment context, symbolic attributes describe the job or organization in terms of subjective, abstract, and intangible attributes (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Specifically, they convey symbolic company information in the form of imagery and general trait inferences that applicants assign to organizations. For instance, applicants might ascribe specific traits (e.g., prestige, ruggedness) to the Army and therefore be attracted to the Army. Although people may use a variety of person-descriptive traits for describing organizations, five higher-order factors seem to underlie symbolic image attributes (Aaker, 1997; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003): sincerity (traits such as honest, sincere, and friendly), excitement (traits such as trendy, spirited, and innovative), competence (traits such as reliable, secure, and successful), sophistication (traits such as upper-class and prestigious), and ruggedness (traits such as masculine and tough).

To date, empirical research generally has supported the instrumental-symbolic

framework for describing and auditing an organization's image as an employer. Slaughter et al. (2004) confirmed that symbolic trait inferences were related to organizational attractiveness. In addition, they found that specific traits assigned to organizations were more attractive depending on applicants' personality traits. Applicants tended to be especially attracted to organizations with traits similar to their own traits. Lievens and Highhouse (2003) showed that symbolic trait inferences 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 trait inferences, versus instrumental attributes. Lievens et al. (2005) confirmed the incremental variance of symbolic trait inferences over and above instrumental attributes in a sample of potential applicants for the Army.

The Importance of Employer Brand Beliefs Across Different Groups

As shown above, most prior studies (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Lievens et al., 2005; Slaughter et al., 2004) have used the instrumental-symbolic framework for auditing an organization's image as an employer among potential applicants. Given the key role of an image audit, it should be clear that potential applicants constitute only one stakeholder in the recruitment process. Specifically, Barber's model of the recruitment process distinguished between three relevant groups. A first group is the applicant population. Barber (1998) defined the applicant population as the group from which the organization can recruit given its recruitment decisions (i.e., decisions to target a particular segment). So, this group consists of potential applicants. The applicant pool is the second group of interest distinguished by Barber

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(1998). Contrary to the applicant population, the individuals in this group no longer are potential applicants targeted by the organization. Instead, individuals in the applicant pool have already applied for a job in the organization. The third relevant population in Barber's (1998) model consists of individuals who have been selected to join the organization (selectees).

To date, no studies have explored employer brand beliefs (instrumental and symbolic) of different groups of individuals ranging from potential applicants to actual applicants and current employees.[1] Yet, such an examination is of both practical and theoretical importance. From a practical view, it should be clear that combining information from an external image audit (among both potential applicants and actual applicants) and an internal image audit (among military personnel already enlisted) provides organizations with a richer and more comprehensive picture of their image as an employer. For example, auditing image factors among both internal and external stakeholders might ensure that a recruitment campaign promotes factors that make it likely that people not only apply to the organization, but also stay working there.

From a conceptual view, it might be interesting to know whether the same factors make an employer attractive for the three different groups. Models of the job search and recruitment process (Barber, 1998; Barber, Daly, Giannantonio, & Phillips, 1994; Blau, 1993; Saks & Ashforth, 2000) might be used fruitfully to formulate hypotheses about which employer beliefs might be prevalent for these different groups. In fact, these models posit that in the early stages, potential applicants have only broad rudimentary information about possible job opportunities. Typically, potential applicants are conducting a broad search among many

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employment alternatives and gather only a limited amount of information per employment alternative. Conversely, actual applicants have narrowed down their search to one or several specific employers. They typically have in-depth information about this employer.

Applying the insights from these process models to the instrumental-symbolic framework leads to three sets of hypotheses. A first set of hypotheses considers the favorability of the employer beliefs. A straightforward hypothesis is that actual applicants will have more positive perceptions about an employer's instrumental and symbolic attributes than potential applicants because these individuals have just made the decision to apply for a job in a given organization. Conversely, potential applicants have not yet applied for a job in the organization. This first hypothesis also is supported by decision-making theories such as the Generalizable Decision Processing Theory (Barber, 1998; Highhouse & Hoffman, 2001; Power & Aldag, 1985; Soelberg, 1967). One of the central premises of this theory is that early on, people identify an implicit favorite employer and engage in some confirmatory bias to rationalize their choice (i.e., the so-called choice confirmation process). To this end, applicants might deliberately distort their perceptions in support of their favorite employer. Thus, this theory predicts that applicants might have more favorable beliefs than potential applicants. As no prior studies have tested this, I posit the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1a: Actual applicants will have more favorable perceptions about an employer's instrumental and symbolic attributes than will potential applicants.

It is more difficult to predict differences between perceptions of actual applicants and people who have recently joined the Army (military employees with tenure less than three years). On the one hand, it is possible that people further engage in rationalization and confirmatory processes once they have entered the organization. As noted by Barber (1998), the job-choice process might modify

the views that employees hold of the employer they have chosen to work for. According to this hypothesis, employees would have even more favorable beliefs than actual applicants. On the other hand, the attrition problems that the armed forces are typically facing might indicate the reverse. In fact, employees might experience some kind of shock once they enter the Army because their perceptions about the Army might not be consistent with the actual work in the military (Mael & Ashforth, 1995). Thus, a competing hypothesis is that employees have less favorable perceptions than actual applicants.

Hypothesis 1b: Actual applicants will have more favorable perceptions about an employer's instrumental and symbolic attributes than will employees.

Hypothesis 1c: Actual applicants will have less favorable perceptions about an employer's instrumental and symbolic attributes than will employees.

A second set of hypotheses posits that different factors will make the Army an attractive employer for these different groups. Again, these hypotheses are grounded on the aforementioned job-search process models. *Potential applicants* typically are conducting a broad search. As they have not narrowed down their preferences to one or two employers, they have only some general information about potential employers. This general information will typically be more trait-like (i.e., the Army is an exciting place to work) instead of factual and concrete. Along these lines, Barber (1998) stated: "At early stages of recruitment, potential applicants may have little or no knowledge of the organization other than its image. Advertisements, postings, and other initial recruitment contacts often provide very little information, so applicants may rely on general impressions of the organization in lieu of more specific knowledge" (p. 34). On a more general level, temporal construal theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003) also proposes that future-distant events (e.g., working for a given company in the minds of potential applicants) are more likely to be represented in

terms of a few abstract and essential features, rather than in terms of concrete details. Therefore, I expect that symbolic attributes will explain more variance among potential applicants than among actual applicants.

The reverse seems to be true for *actual applicants*. This group has chosen to apply to a specific employer. Thus, the notion of potentially working for a specific company is a near-future event in their minds. On the basis of temporal construal theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003), it can be expected that they will attach a lot of attention to specific, concrete, and factual information about the specific instrumental attributes of a given employer. Therefore, I expect that instrumental attributes will explain more variance among actual applicants than among potential applicants.

With regard to *employees*, I expect that symbolic trait inferences will explain more variance than instrumental attributes. This hypothesis is based on the importance of symbolic meanings in the development and management of organizational identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). In fact, the symbolic attributes that applicants perceive to be related to an organization as a place to work map very well onto 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 dimensions identified by Lievens and Highhouse (2003). Thus, I present the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: Perceptions of instrumental attributes will explain more variance in the Army's perceived attractiveness as an employer among actual applicants as compared to potential applicants.

…the symbolic attributes that applicants perceive to be related to an organization as a place to work map very well onto the factors that are posited to be related to organizational identification.

Hypothesis 2b: Perceptions of instrumental attributes will explain more variance in the Army's perceived attractiveness as an employer among actual applicants as compared to employees.

Hypothesis 3a: Perceptions of symbolic attributes will explain more variance in the Army's perceived attractiveness as an employer among potential applicants as compared to actual applicants.

Hypothesis 3b: Perceptions of symbolic attributes will explain more variance in the Army's perceived attractiveness as an employer among employees as compared to actual applicants.

Method

Sample and Procedure

As noted above, three different samples were used. The first sample consisted of potential applicants. Along these lines, prior research demonstrated that people who enlist in the Army during the first years after high school knew they would do so by the end of their senior year in high school (Bachman, Segal, Freedman-Doan, & O'Malley, 2000). For this reason, I contacted a representative set of Belgian high schools (in terms of region and type of education) and mailed questionnaires to 800 final-year students of these high schools. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. I received complete responses from 429 final-year students (86% men, 14% women; mean age = 18.1 yrs., SD = 1.0), yielding a response rate of 54%.

The largest Army recruitment office in each of the five main regions in Belgium participated, ensuring that the sample of actual applicants was geographically representative.

With respect to the second sample (actual applicants), information was collected at Army recruitment offices where individuals apply for Army jobs. The largest Army recruitment office in each of the five main regions in Belgium participated, ensuring that the sample of actual applicants was geographically representative. All individuals who applied for an Army job in one of these five recruitment offices in January 2004 were asked to complete the research questionnaire. I 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 completing the psychometric tests of the selection procedure. Most of the applicants were willing to participate in the study, resulting in 392 usable responses (a response rate of 78%). The applicant sample consisted of 88% male applicants and 12% female applicants. Their mean age was 21.3 years (SD = 3.6).

The third sample consisted of military employees who recently had joined the Army (i.e., military employees with less than three years' tenure). Specifically, questionnaires were distributed to a representative group of military employees during a work break that was organized for completing the questionnaires. I received completed questionnaires from 134 military employees (99% response rate) with less than three years' tenure (89% men, 11% women; mean age = 22.6 yrs., SD = 3.3). The mean tenure was 1.9 yrs. (SD = 0.8). The distribution across the various commands of the Army was as follows: Ground Force (70%) and Air Force (30%). Seventy-nine percent of the respondents were soldiers, 18% were noncommissioned officers, and 4% were officers.

Generally, these three samples were similar in terms of gender composition (all were male-dominated samples). In addition, these three samples had similar educational backgrounds. Specifically, over 95% of the respondents in the actual applicant and military employee samples had an educational degree obtained at high schools targeted in the sample of potential applicants.

Measures

Job and Organizational Characteristics

As it was important to ensure that relevant job and organizational attributes were included in the main study, I used an inductive strategy for identifying job and organizational attributes related to the attractiveness of the Belgian Army as an employer. In par-

T A B L E I	**Results of Pre-Study Examining Reasons for Joining the Army**

	Category
A job in the Army involves a lot of physical activities.	I
Working in the Army provides you with job security.	I
Someone of my family is in the Army.	--
Working in the Army is the fulfillment of a childhood dream.	--
Working in the Army is adventurous.	S
Working in the Army provides you with a good salary.	I
The Army gives you educational opportunities (other than school).	I
The Army provides you with opportunities for advancement.	I
A job in the Army involves a varied set of tasks/activities.	I
In the Army you can become a pilot.	--
A job in the Army involves a lot of social/team activities.	I
A job in the Army involves a lot of travel opportunities.	I
In the Army you work in a well-defined structure.	I
Working in the Army is prestigious.	S
In the Army you work on board of a ship.	--
In the Army you wear a uniform.	--
In the Army you serve your country.	--

Note. I = Instrumental attribute, S = Symbolic attribute. Dashes indicate that the reason was not withheld because it was tied to a specific division of the Army (e.g., "become a pilot") was given by less than 1 percent of the interviewees (e.g., "wear a uniform") or because it could not be classified as either instrumental or symbolic (e.g., "a childhood dream").

ticular, semistructured interviews with actual applicants and military employees were conducted. Respondents were asked to state various reasons for joining the Army. These focus groups and interviews were audio taped and transcribed. The primary reasons per interviewee were extracted from the interview transcripts and sorted in 17 nonre-dundant categories (see Table I). Note that the participants in the semistructured interviews were not included in the samples of the main study. Next, I removed reasons that were tied to a specific division of the Army (e.g., "become a pilot") or that were given by less than 1% of the interviewees (e.g., "wear a uniform"). Finally, two research assistants

coded whether the remaining 13 reasons were instrumental or symbolic. Agreement was satisfactory (Kappa = .84), and discrepancies were resolved upon discussion. As shown in Table I, nine reasons were seen as instrumental (e.g., "a job in the Army involves a lot of physical activities," "working in the Army provides you with a good salary"), whereas two reasons were classified as symbolic ("working in the Army is prestigious," "working in the Army is adventurous").[2] Two reasons ("fulfillment of a dream" and "someone of my family is in the Army") could not be classified. The nine instrumental reasons served as a basis for writing items per attribute. Respondents answered these items using a five-point rating scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

I examined the psychometric properties of this questionnaire in the total sample. I began 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, I conducted a confirmatory factor analysis using EQS (Bentler, 1995). In particular, I specified a confirmatory factor analysis model in which each indicator variable (item) was specified to load only on the latent variable it was purported to measure. In addition, each latent variable was allowed to co-vary with the other latent variables. As there were nine scales, there were nine correlated latent variables specified. No structural relationships between these latent variables were specified.

To assess model fit, the following fit indices were used: the relative noncentrality index (RNI), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The RNI and TLI measures of fit are found to be unbiased and to be relatively independent of sample size (Marsh, Balla, & McDonald, 1988; McDonald & Marsh, 1990). The RMSEA is a measure of fit

The nine-factor model clearly outperformed a one-factor model, as indicated by the fit indices of the latter model (RNI = .61, TLI = .58, and RMSEA = .117).

per degree of freedom of the model (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Steiger, 1990). It is also possible to establish confidence intervals around the RMSEA. The criteria for evaluating these fit indices were for the RNI and TLI to have values equal to or above .90 (Becker & Cote, 1994; Conway, 1996) and for the RMSEA to be less or equal to .08 (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). According to these fit statistics, a confirmatory factor analysis with nine correlated factors produced a good fit to the data, RNI = .93, TLI = .92, and RMSEA = .050 (.047–.054). The nine-factor model clearly outperformed a one-factor model, as indicated by the fit indices of the latter model (RNI = .61, TLI = .58, and RMSEA = .117). As shown in Table II, the internal consistencies of the scales were satisfactory. The Appendix presents the 30 items associated with the nine scales.

Trait Inferences About the Army

I used the 18-item scale of Lievens et al. (2005) for measuring the Army's symbolic trait dimensions. Lievens et al. developed this scale on the basis of Aaker's (1997) brand personality scale. They found evidence for six distinct factors—namely, sincerity (e.g., honest, sincere), cheerfulness (e.g., cheerful, friendly), excitement (e.g., daring, exciting), competence (e.g., intelligent, technical), prestige (e.g., high status, highly regarded), and ruggedness (e.g., tough, rugged). Respondents indicated their agreement with these items using a five-point rating scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

The psychometric properties of this measure were examined by conducting a confirmatory factor analysis using EQS (Bentler, 1995). A model with six correlated latent variables was specified, with each item loading only on the latent variable it was purported to measure. Inspection of the fit statistics revealed that the six-factor model provided a good fit to the data, RNI = .96, TLI = .95, and RMSEA = .056 (.051–.062). This six-factor model also clearly outperformed a one-factor model as indicated by the fit indices of the latter model (RNI = .59, TLI = .53, and RMSEA = .168). As shown in Table II, the

TABLE II	Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Study Variables in Total Sample (*N* = 955)

	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.	16.
Job/organizational characteristics																		
1. Social/team activities	4.02	.80	.83															
2. Physical activities	3.64	1.00	.42	.68														
3. Structure	3.68	.83	.44	.40	.71													
4. Advancement	3.30	1.01	.48	.37	.48	.85												
5. Travel opportunities	3.35	.88	.40	.39	.41	.50	.82											
6. Pay and benefits	3.03	1.40	.37	.16	.40	.56	.39	.83										
7. Job security	3.87	.89	.52	.30	.38	.53	.37	.51	.86									
8. Educational opportunities	3.60	1.11	.07	−.02	.00	.03	−.08	.08	.03	.76								
9. Task diversity	3.48	.87	.54	.41	.43	.62	.50	.49	.57	.00	.82							
Symbolic trait inferences																		
10. Sincerity	3.15	1.07	.44	.27	.40	.48	.34	.46	.42	.15	.49	.87						
11. Excitement	3.46	1.06	.39	.32	.46	.40	.44	.34	.30	.03	.44	.47	.87					
12. Cheerfulness	3.02	.94	.45	.32	.34	.46	.38	.42	.44	.01	.55	.59	.52	.78				
13. Competence	3.43	.87	.45	.31	.41	.47	.39	.41	.41	.11	.51	.55	.56	.54	.77			
14. Prestige	3.07	1.00	.41	.36	.45	.51	.42	.49	.44	−.01	.53	.48	.49	.56	.43	.68		
15. Ruggedness	2.85	1.00	.06	.16	.15	.01	.11	.02	−.02	−.18	.05	.02	.26	.08	.13	.17	.71	
Dependent Variable																		
16. Attractiveness as an employer	3.43	1.23	.55	.30	.35	.47	.40	.48	.59	.16	.58	.51	.47	.57	.52	.50	.01	.95

Note. Internal consistencies are on the diagonal. Correlations ≥ .06 are significant at $p < .05$ and correlations ≥ .09 at $p < .01$. All measures were rated on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree.*

internal consistencies of these scales were satisfactory. The Appendix presents the items associated with each of these six scales.

Army's Attractiveness as an Employer

Three items (see Appendix) were adapted from the measure of organizational attractiveness proposed by Highhouse et al. (2004) <ZAQ;1>. An example item is "For me, the Army would be a good place to work." These items were slightly reworded in the military sample because this sample consisted of people who were already working for the Army (e.g., "For me, the Army is 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 .95.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table II presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations among this study's variables. Internal consistencies are on the diagonal. Virtually all variables were significantly related to the Army's attractiveness as an employer. This is not surprising because I conducted a pre-study to identify relevant variables. The average correlation between instrumental attributes and symbolic trait inferences was .34.

Test of Hypotheses

The first set of hypotheses dealt with the ratings of the instrumental and symbolic attributes related to the Army as an employer across the three samples. Table III presents the means and standard deviations of the study variables broken down by sample. I tested these hypotheses using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), which showed a significant multivariate effect for sample, F (32, 1852) = 61.56, $p < .001$, Wilks's lambda = .24, partial eta^2 = .52. I followed this MANOVA with planned comparison tests related to Hypotheses 1a to 1c. Hypothesis 1a stated that actual applicants would have more favorable perceptions about an employer's instrumental and symbolic attributes than potential applicants. The planned comparison tests revealed that there were significant ($p < .01$) differences between actual and potential applicants for all attributes. Table III shows that the means of actual applicants were significantly higher than those of potential applicants, supporting Hypothesis 1a. I also included an effect size measure (Cohen's *d*) as an index of the mag-

| TABLE III | Means and Standard Deviations of Study Variables Broken Down by Sample | | | | | | | |

	Potential applicant sample (N = 429)		Actual applicant sample (N = 392)		Military employee sample (N = 134)			
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	d (actual vs. potential)	d (actual vs. employees)
Job/organizational characteristics								
Social/team activities	3.59 c	0.91	4.44 a	0.53	4.10 b	0.68	.98	.56
Physical activities	3.56 b	1.01	4.01 a	0.74	3.55 b	1.09	.49	.53
Structure	3.90 b	.75	4.35 a	.51	3.51 c	0.70	.67	1.24
Advancement	3.17 b	1.00	4.14 a	.61	2.99 b	1.02	1.00	1.29
Travel opportunities	3.25 b	.93	3.84 a	.71	3.11 b	.90	.67	.88
Pay and benefits	2.79 b	1.03	4.24 a	.66	2.87 b	1.53	1.28	1.22
Job security	3.22 c	.96	4.37 a	.55	4.06 b	.74	1.18	.49
Educational opportunities	3.36 b	1.15	3.84 a	.99	3.54 b	1.07	.43	.29
Task diversity	3.22 b	.83	4.19 a	.61	3.34 b	.78	1.10	1.13
Symbolic trait inferences								
Sincerity	3.05 b	1.03	4.22 a	.65	3.00 b	.88	1.11	1.36
Excitement	3.60 b	1.09	4.36 a	.63	3.25 c	.94	.78	1.27
Cheerfulness	2.77 b	.98	3.83 a	.73	2.98 c	.75	1.04	1.03
Competence	3.27 b	.90	4.13 a	.62	3.37 b	.74	.97	1.04
Prestige	3.04 b	.99	3.87 a	.61	3.07 b	.96	.89	1.01
Ruggedness	3.13 a	1.10	2.94 b	1.02	2.84 b	.90	−.19	.09
Dependent Variable								
Attractiveness as an employer	2.27 c	1.18	4.64 a	.48	3.77 b	.88	1.58	1.19

Note. A MANOVA showed a significant multivariate effect for sample, $F(32, 1852) = 61.56$, $p < .001$, Wilks's lambda = .24, partial eta^2 = .52. Means in the same row with different subscripts are statistically different from each other, $p < .05$.

nitude of the differences across the samples (see the second-to-last column of Table III). The largest differences between the perceptions of potential and actual applicants were found for instrumental attributes such as pay and benefits, job security, and task diversity.

The next competing hypotheses referred to differences between actual applicants and employees. The planned comparison tests showed that there were significant ($p < .01$) differences between actual applicants and enlisted military for all attributes (with the exception of ruggedness). As indicated in Table III, actual applicants had more favorable perceptions about an employer's attributes than did employees. These differences were quite large, as shown by the effect sizes. For nine attributes, the effect sizes exceeded 1 SD. These results lend support to Hypothesis 1b but not to Hypothesis 1c.

Hypothesis 2a stated that perceptions of instrumental attributes would explain more variance in the Army's perceived attractiveness as an employer among actual applicants as compared to potential applicants. In addition, Hypothesis 2b posited

that perceptions of instrumental attributes would explain more variance in the Army's perceived attractiveness as an employer among actual applicants as compared to employees. Table IV presents the results of a regression analysis in which all nine instrumental job and organizational attributes were entered simultaneously. In all samples, these attributes explained a substantial amount of variance—40% for the actual applicant and 22% for both the potential applicant and military employee samples. I then tested whether the difference in explained variance between these groups was statistically significant. On the basis of formulas outlined in Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2002, p. 88), I computed a 95% confidence interval around the difference in R^2. Results showed that this confidence interval did not contain zero for both the difference in R^2 between actual applicants and potential applicants, $\Delta R^2 = .17$ (.07–.28) and the difference in R^2 between actual applicants and employees, $\Delta R^2 = .17$ (.03–.31). These results support Hypotheses 2a and 2b.

T A B L E I V	Regression of the Army's Attractiveness as an Employer Broken Down by Sample		
	Potential applicant sample (N = 429)	Actual applicant sample (N = 392)	Military employee sample (N = 134)
	β	β	β
Social/team activities	.12*	.17***	.09
Physical activities	.00	.10*	−.03
Structure	−.01	.23***	.32***
Advancement	.03	.03	−.04
Travel opportunities	.18***	.02	.14
Pay and benefits	−.01	.02	−.02
Job security	.07	.15**	.07
Educational opportunities	.05	.18***	.13
Task diversity	.26***	.15*	.04
R^2	.22***	.40***	.22***
Adjusted R^2	.21	.38	.17

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

T A B L E V	Regression of the Army's Attractiveness on Symbolic Trait Inferences Broken Down by Sample		
	Potential applicant sample (N = 429)	Actual applicant sample (N = 392)	Military employee sample (N = 134)
	β	β	β
Sincerity	−.04	.14***	.24**
Excitement	.19***	.26***	.24**
Cheerfulness	.25***	−.01	−.16
Competence	.09	.16***	.28***
Prestige	.16***	.25***	.01
Ruggedness	−.01	−.09*	.08
R^2	.26***	.30***	.29***
Adjusted R^2	.25	.29	.26

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

Finally, Hypothesis 3a posited that perceptions of symbolic attributes would explain more variance in the Army's perceived attractiveness as an employer among potential applicants as compared to actual applicants. Hypothesis 3b stated that perceptions of symbolic attributes would explain more variance in the Army's perceived attractiveness as an employer among employees as compared to actual applicants. Table V presents the results of a regression analysis in which all symbolic attributes were entered simultaneously. Symbolic attributes explained a substantial amount of variance: 26% in the potential applicant sample, 30% in the actual applicant sample, and 29% in the military employee sample. So, symbolic attributes were important predictors in all samples, lending no support to Hypotheses 3a and 3b. In fact, using the formulas of Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2002, p. 88), the differences in explained variance between these groups were not statistically significant.

Tables IV and V further indicate that excitement emerged as the only consistent significant predictor of the Army's attractiveness as a place to work across the three samples. In the potential applicant sample, social activities, travel opportunities, task diversity, cheerfulness, and prestige were significant predictors. In the actual applicant sample, the significant predictors were social activities, physical activities, structure, job security, educational opportunities, task diversity, cheerfulness, competence, and prestige. Finally, in the military employee sample, structure, sincerity, and competence predicted the Army's attractiveness as an employer.

I also conducted a hierarchical regression in which the instrumental job and organizational attributes were entered as a first block. As a second block, the symbolic trait inferences were entered in the regression equation. This set of factors was entered after the job and organizational attributes because symbolic trait inferences typically accrue from how people perceive an organization's more factual attributes (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). In all samples, symbolic attributes explained a significant additional portion of the variance. In the potential applicant sample, symbolic trait inferences explained 10% of incremental variance, 13% in the military employee sample, and 4% in the actual applicant sample.

Discussion

Over the last few years, employer branding has emerged as a buzzword in the professional HR literature. To date, empirical studies examining its assumptions and effects are scarce. This study builds on conceptualizations of the employer brand as a package of instrumental and symbolic attributes. As the main purpose, this study examines the relative importance of instrumental and symbolic employer brand beliefs across different groups of individuals that are relevant to organizations in the recruitment process. Specifically, theory-driven hypotheses are formulated about the employer brand beliefs held by three groups of individuals—namely, potential applicants, actual applicants, and military employees.

Main Conclusions

First, this study confirms the usefulness of the instrumental-symbolic framework as a conceptualization of employer brands (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Lievens et al., 2005). In all three samples, the set of instrumental job and organizational attributes and symbolic trait inferences are significantly related to the Army's attractiveness as an employer. In all three samples, symbolic trait inferences also explain incremental variance over and above perceptions of instrumental job and organizational attributes. These results have implications for employer branding theory and practice. Specifically, they underscore that current conceptualizations of company employment image should include

Symbolic attributes explained a substantial amount of variance: 26% in the potential applicant sample, 30% in the actual applicant sample, and 29% in the military employee sample.

both instrumental attributes and symbolic meanings (person-descriptive trait inferences) that people associate with particular organizations.

Second, this study adds some key findings to the extant literature on employer image, as support was found for several hypotheses with respect to the relative importance of instrumental and symbolic attributes across the three different groups. Accordingly, this study informs our understanding of how organizations should interact with different populations during recruitment. Consistent with my hypotheses, perceptions of instrumental attributes explain significantly more variance (40%) in the Army's perceived attractiveness as an employer among actual applicants compared to potential applicants and employees. Our finding that actual applicants attach much more importance to instrumental factors than the other groups might be explained by the fact that they gather specific, concrete, and factual information about the specific employer for whom they want to work. This finding does not mean that actual applicants do not value the symbolic image dimensions, since these dimensions also explained a substantial amount of variance (30%) in this group.

Another key finding was that symbolic trait inferences played an important role in determining attractiveness among *all* three groups. The large portion of variance (26%) explained by symbolic trait inferences in the potential applicant sample can be understood on the basis of job search process models (Barber, 1998; Barber et al., 1994; Blau, 1993; Saks & Ashforth, 2000). As noted above, these models posit that in the early stages, potential applicants conduct a broad search among many employment alternatives and gather only a limited amount of information per employment alternative. Hence, potential applicants are likely to be more or less attracted to the Army based on generalized beliefs (i.e., symbolic attributes).

The result that symbolic meanings account for so much variance (29%) in explaining the Army's attractiveness as an employer for current military employees fits well with the literature on organizational identification. Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail (1994) defined perceived organizational identity as organizational members' beliefs about the distinctive, central, and enduring attributes of the organization. They further proposed a relationship between the attractiveness of this perceived identity and an employee's organizational identification. So, it seems likely that the Army attributes that emerged as significant determinants among military employees will be especially important with respect to the organizational identification of military employees (see Mael & Ashforth, 1995). Clearly, future research is needed that links symbolic trait inferences to organizational identification and job satisfaction.

Third, this study reveals that actual applicants have consistently more favorable perceptions about an employer's instrumental and symbolic attributes than potential applicants. In addition, actual applicant perceptions are consistently higher than employee perceptions. Whereas the first result is not surprising, the other result deserves some attention. This result does not support the idea that employees engage in confirmatory processes to rationalize their choice once they have entered an organization. Instead, it seems to indicate that a difference exists between the perceived image of the Army among applicants and its perceived identity among employees. The finding that actual applicants have more favorable perceptions about the Army as an employer than do employees is important because it may *partially* explain why there exists substantial attrition among enlisted recruits. As this implication is based on cross-sectional self-reports gathered by a single survey, it should be interpreted with caution, and longitudinal research is needed to confirm it further. For example, one could examine whether applicants carry these optimistic per-

…this study reveals that actual applicants have consistently more favorable perceptions about an employer's instrumental and symbolic attributes than potential applicants.

ceptions forward into employment (Bauer, Morrison, & Callister, 1998) and whether these flawed perceptions affect job performance and turnover.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, this study is conducted in the Belgian Army. Therefore, future studies are needed to examine the generalizability of the results in other settings and countries. Generally, I believe that the conclusions with regard to image audits are relevant for many large organizations in the private and public sector that face the constant challenge to attract and retain the necessary quantity and quality of personnel. However, a potential boundary condition to generalizability is that the Army typically has a strong and distinctive image as an employer. Clearly, not all organizations have such a distinctive image. Second, the independent and dependent variables are collected at the same point in time. So, the results may be subject to common method variance. Given the cross-sectional nature of the data, reverse causality also may be a problem. In fact, it seems equally likely that individuals who are not attracted to the military will rate all attributes as low, whereas individuals who are attracted to the military will rate all attributes as high even if they do not have accurate information on which to develop these beliefs.

Implications for Practitioners

This study has various implications for HR practice. In particular, it highlights that an image audit should be conducted not only in applicant samples (external image audit), but also in employee samples holding an insider view of the organization (internal image audit). This audit enables organizations to compare and integrate the perceptions of potential and actual applicants with these of current employees. Ultimately, this integrated information should be indicative of what the Army might promote as a value proposition to applicants and employees. From a practical point of view, the results further suggest that organizations should include both instrumental and symbolic attributes in their image audits. If they only focus on job and organizational attributes (as is traditionally the case), an important part of what makes an organization an attractive employer is ignored.

FILIP LIEVENS is a professor in the Department of Personnel Management and Work and Organizational Psychology at Ghent University, Belgium. In 1999, he earned his PhD from the same university. His current research interests focus on selection procedures (e.g., assessment centers, situational judgment tests) and organizational attractiveness. He is the author of over 50 articles and 100 presentations at international conferences. He has published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology, Personnel Psychology,* the *Journal of Organizational Behavior,* the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, Applied Psychology: An International Review,* and the *International Journal of Selection and Assessment.* He has received several awards, including the Best Paper Award from the International Personnel Management Association (2001) and the Distinguished Early Career Award from the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology (2006).

NOTES

1. In Barber's (1998) model, the third group refers to selectees—namely, individuals who are offered employment. In this study, our third group consists of military employees. However, I concentrated on employees who recently joined the Army, because only employees with less than three years of tenure were included.

2. The two symbolic reasons for joining the Army that arose from the pre-study are captured in the measure for symbolic trait inferences about the Army. "Working in the Army is prestigious" belongs to the factor prestige, whereas "Working in the Army is adventurous" relates to the factor excitement.

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A P P E N D I X A   **Overview of Items Measuring Study Variables**

Social/team activities

- The Army offers the possibility to work together with different people.

- The Army offers the possibility to be amongst people.

- The Army offers the possibility to enjoy a group atmosphere.

- The Army offers the possibility to work in teams.

Physical activities

- Working in the Army offers the possibility to practice many sports.

- Working in the Army offers a lot of physical challenges.

Structure

- The Army is a good place to work if you like getting orders.

- The Army offers the possibility to be tied to strict rules.

- The Army offers the possibility to gain some discipline.

- The Army offers the possibility to work in a well-defined structure.

Advancement

- The Army offers diverse career opportunities.

- The Army offers prospects for higher positions.

- The Army offers the possibility to build a career.

Travel opportunities

- The Army offers the possibility to see a lot of the world.

- The Army offers the possibility to do a lot of foreign assignments.

- The Army offers the possibility to live far away from home.

- The Army offers the possibility to travel a lot.

Pay and benefits

- The Army offers the possibility to make a lot of money.

- In general, the wages in the Army are high.

Job security

- The Army offers the possibility to hold a permanent position.

- The Army offers job security.

- The Army offers people a job for life.

- The Army offers prospects for a certain future.

Educational opportunities

- Working in the Army is a way out if you are tired of studying.

- Working in the Army is the ideal solution for school tiredness.

- The Army offers the possibility to escape from school.

Task diversity

- The Army offers the possibility to practice a diverse range of jobs.

- The Army offers the possibility to choose from a diversity of jobs.

- Working in the Army offers a lot of variety.

- The Army offers a wide range of jobs.

Sincerity

- Honest.

- Sincere.

- Down-to-earth.

Cheerfulness

- Cheerful.

- Friendly.

- Original.

Excitement

- Daring.

- Exciting.

- Thrilling.

Competence

- Intelligent.

- Technical.

- Corporate.

Prestige

- High status.

- Highly regarded.

- Well-respected.

Ruggedness

- Tough.

- Rugged.

- Masculine.

The Army's attractiveness as an employer

- For me, the Army would be a good place to work.

- The Army is attractive to me as a place for employment.

- A job in the Army is very appealing to me.