

Social-identity functions of attraction to organizations [☆]

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Abstract

This article examines the self-presentation goals that underlie attraction to organizations. Expanding on Lievens and Highhouse's (2003) instrumental vs. symbolic classification of corporate attributes, a theory of symbolic attraction is presented that posits social-identity consciousness as a moderator of the relation between symbolic inferences about organizations (e.g., this company is dynamic and innovative) and attraction to those organizations. A measure of social-identity consciousness is developed, and a series of studies confirmed two dimensions, labeled concern for *social adjustment* and concern for *value expression*. Preliminary evidence supports the validity of the measure and its role in moderating attraction to symbolic features of well-known firms.

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Introduction

A man is known by the company he keeps.

—Euripides

What psychological benefits do people derive from being associated with well-known organizations? Organizational theorists have maintained that members commonly define themselves in terms of what their organization represents (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Elsbach, 1999). Organizations, therefore, are said to serve as a part of one's social-identity, or self-concept as it relates to the significance of organizational membership (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Scott & Lane, 2000).

Because one's employer is such an important part of one's identity, prospective applicants are likely to pay particular attention to their general feelings or impressions of an organization in deciding whether or not to pursue employment (Cable & Turban, 2001). Yet, personnel decision-making researchers have only recently begun to systematically examine a person's general impressions of a recruiting organization (e.g., Collins & Stevens, 2002; Highhouse, Zickar, Thorsteinson, Stierwalt, & Slaughter, 1999; Lemmink, Schuijff, & Streukens, 2003; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Slaughter, Zickar, Highhouse, & Mohr, 2004).

Lievens and Highhouse (2003) noted that organizational attraction is determined by more than simply instrumental attributes of the job, but also by more *symbolic* meanings associated with being a part of a particular firm. In other words, many of the associations that make up a company's distinctiveness as an employer go beyond the perceived quality of its pay, benefits, and opportunities for promotion, and deal with less tangible properties of the corporation (e.g., Apple is "hip," IKEA is "fashionable"). In their study of Belgian banks, the authors found that symbolic factors such as perceived innovativeness and competence accounted for incremental variance, over

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factors such as pay and advancement, in predicting firm attraction. Perhaps more importantly, the symbolic factors identified by Lievens and Highhouse discriminated the banks from one another more than did the instrumental factors.

Understanding inferences about symbolic features of well-known corporations would seem to be an area where psychological theory has much to contribute to research on organizational attraction. Research to date, although valuable, has been highly inductive. For example, Highhouse et al. (1999) identified the non-instrumental determinants of attraction to fast-food employers by asking people which of two randomly chosen companies they preferred to work for (e.g., “Would you rather work for Taco Bell or KFC?”), and *why* they preferred the chosen one over the non-chosen one. Lievens and Highhouse (2003) used personality traits inductively derived in the consumer-product literature, and Slaughter et al. (2004) identified traits based on descriptions of firms using Big Five adjective checklists. Two limitations of the approaches used to study the symbolic content of job-seeker impressions are (a) they are not based on any theory of job-seeker attitudes, and (b) they focus on describing the target firms, rather than on understanding the perceiver’s motivations.

This article delves deeper into Lievens and Highhouse’s (2003) notion of symbolic attraction, by considering the motives underlying this attraction. Our primary focus is on the *perceiver* of potential employers, with the belief that understanding the psychology of attraction to organizations requires understanding the objectives of the person being attracted. This is in keeping with a long tradition in attitude research of examining the psychological needs served by attitudes (Katz, 1960; Maio & Olsen, 2000; Pratkanis, Breckler, & Greenwald, 1989; Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956). We suggest that attraction to symbolic features of firms is functional, in that it allows the job seeker to communicate to others how he or she wants to be perceived. That is, we suggest that concern for symbolic attributes is motivated by desires to regulate others’ impressions of one’s self. We present a theory of attraction to symbolic features of organizations that focuses on the self-presentation motives that are posited to underlie this attraction. A key feature of this theory is the role of individual-differences in self-presentation concerns. As such, we report the development of a measure of this individual difference, along with studies examining construct validity and the theorized role of this individual difference in moderating the relation between organizational inferences and attraction.

First, however, we briefly review the instrumental vs. symbolic dichotomy of Lievens and Highhouse (2003). We also attempt to clarify the considerable construct confusion in the literature on applicant attraction by drawing a cleaner line of distinction between the actions of the target organization and the perceptions of the job seeker.

Instrumental vs. symbolic features of organizations

Lievens and Highhouse (2003) noted that marketing research on brand image (e.g., Keller, 1993; Padgett & Allen, 1997) has distinguished between features of a product or service that provide functional consequences (i.e., instrumental features), and those that provide symbolic meanings to consumers (i.e., symbolic features). Instrumental features of a product are objective, physical, and tangible, and allow people to maximize rewards and minimize punishments. Symbolic features, on the other hand, are linked to social-identity and self-expression concerns. Translating this to the recruitment context, Lievens and Highhouse (2003) suggested that job seekers not only concern themselves with the tangible and functional features of jobs (e.g., working conditions, job security) but also with the meanings that people associate with the employing organization (e.g., sincerity, prestige).

Although the authors presented the instrumental vs. symbolic dichotomy as an application of marketing research to the area of recruitment, the assumptions originally behind this work were rooted in the functionalist approach to the psychology of attitudes (Katz, 1960; Smith et al., 1956). The functionalist approach is based on the notion that attitudes should be studied according to the psychological needs they meet, or the functions they serve for the people who hold them (Maio & Olsen, 2000; Pratkanis et al., 1989). People are said to develop attitudes that provide psychological benefit, and that this benefit varies from person to person. Said another way, attitudes allow people to carry out plans and realize goals (Snyder & DeBono, 1989). The primary functions proposed in this literature can be broadly categorized as *utilitarian* (i.e., satisfied by instrumental features) and *social-identity* (i.e., satisfied by symbolic features) functions of attitudes (Shavitt, 1989). The utilitarian function refers to the potential for attitudes to maximize rewards and minimize punishments in one’s environment. For example, the belief that stockholders should be the primary constituency for a CEO enables that CEO to engage in mass layoffs without feeling excessive feelings of guilt and responsibility. By believing that autonomy is the most important part of a job, a professor can justify passing up opportunities for better pay in the private sector.

At a general level, social-identity functions refer to the facility of attitudes to establish identities and obtain social approval (Shavitt, 1989). Put simply, people hold and express attitudes to communicate something about themselves to others. For example, people may be attracted to automobiles that are fuel-efficient because the preference shows that they care about the environment. Some people may be attracted to designer apparel because the preference shows to others that they spent a lot of money on something highly desired by others.

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