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Lasting footprints of the employer brand: can sustainable HRM lead to brand commitment?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether both perceived sustainable organizational and supervisor support, which represent a sustainable human resource management (HRM) approach, can induce commitment to the employer brand.

Design/methodology/approach – This study includes a diverse sample of 3,016 employees drawn from various German organizations. To test the developed hypotheses, a structural model that included all the hypothesized effects was built, using Mplus 7.

Findings – Perceived sustainable supervisor support (PSSS) has a direct effect on brand commitment, whereas perceived sustainable organizational support (PSOS) only generates brand commitment indirectly, mediated by brand prestige, brand distinctiveness, and brand trust. The findings further underline that, compared with PSOS, PSSS has a stronger impact on trust in respect of the employer brand.

Originality/value – By considering current employees and their commitment to the employer brand, this study takes an insider view and sheds new light on how an employer brand based on sustainable HRM can achieve commitment, as well as how several mediators affect this link.

Keywords Organizational support, Supervisor support, Brand commitment, Sustainability, Employer branding, Sustainable HRM

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In the face of strong internal organizational pressures, such as downsizing, outsourcing, increased performance and time pressures, longer work hours, and work-life balance conflicts, employees often seek out organizations that seem to have their interests in mind. In turn, organizations depend on a highly qualified, motivated workforce to achieve their economic goals in the long term (Ehnert, 2009). In this respect, the emphasis on sustainability in the human resource management (HRM) context has expanded in both research and practice (Clarke, 2011; Ehnert, 2009; Jabbour and Santos, 2008). Organizations such as BMW, Volkswagen, L'Oréal, and Siemens even include this topic in their sustainability reports. Ehnert (2009, p. 74) defines sustainable HRM as "the pattern of planned or emerging human resource (HR) strategies and practices intended to enable organizational goal achievement while simultaneously reproducing the HR base over a long-lasting calendar time." Sustainability in HRM highlights the value of HRs and stresses the importance of the employability and the long-term availability of employees as a means of ensuring a high-quality workforce currently and in the future. In turn, such a workforce increases the chances of organizational success. This understanding of sustainability originates from old European forestry law targeted at ensuring that the consumption of resources and the resource supply were balanced to safeguard permanent access to these resources. This view encompasses social responsibilities toward employees and

economic success. We therefore consider how organizations create value for their potential and existing employees by investing in their long-term availability and viability (e.g. maintaining employee health and safety, supporting their work-life balance, managing aging workforces, developing their work-related skills, and promoting a culture of lifelong learning), which should ensure a high-quality workforce for the future. This type of investment in employees refers to a substance-oriented understanding of sustainability, according to which the survival of an organization can only be secured if the consumption and regeneration of its HRs are balanced (Müller-Christ and Remer, 1999). In this sense, sustainability involves maintaining the HR base in order to ensure its value and, thus, employees' work capability (Ehnert, 2009). Thus, a substance-oriented understanding highlights economic success, as well as social responsibilities toward employees.

Drawing on organizational support literature (e.g. Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986), we suggest that employees interpret HRM, or organizational actions related to the preservation of their individual performance capability, as a form of sustainable organizational support. Moreover, since a supervisor is considered a representative of the employing organization, we anticipate that employees not only form perceptions of sustainable organizational support, but also of sustainable supervisor support.

By implementing a sustainable HRM approach, organizations seek to unify two major targets: the first is meeting their employees' needs and expectations (e.g. constant development, health, stress reduction, and work-life balance) in order to maintain their productivity. The second target is that by doing so, organizations increase their competitiveness regarding attracting high-quality employees on the job market, which constitutes a valuable source of competitive advantage (Ehnert, 2009; Jabbour and Santos, 2008). Hence, organizations can use a sustainable HRM approach to position themselves as employee oriented and to differentiate themselves from their competitors on the labor market. In this context, the concept of employer branding is playing an increasing role (Arachchige and Robertson, 2011; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Ambler and Barrow (1996) initially introduced employer branding as a field of research by applying marketing principles to the HRM field and emphasizing that an organization's goal is to manage its identity as an employer and to create an image of itself as a "great place to work" to attract potential and to retain current employees. So far studies have identified several attraction features, such as organizational reputation, recruiter behavior, and job and organizational factors (e.g. Arachchige and Robertson, 2011; Lievens and Highhouse, 2003; Turban *et al.*, 1998). Far less research considers how such features influence current employees' commitment to the employer brand, even though negative impacts, such as absenteeism and increasing turnover rates, emphasize the importance of studying this issue (e.g. Rhoades *et al.*, 2001). Thus, this paper takes current employees' perspective and investigates their commitment to the employer brand.

Although growing emphasis focusses on the sustainability topic in HRM, no extant empirical research has analyzed the role of sustainability in retaining employees. Corporate social responsibility research confirms the positive relationship between an organization's corporate social responsiveness and its attractiveness for potential applicants (e.g. Backhaus *et al.*, 2002; Greening and Turban, 2000; Jones *et al.*, 2014). Nevertheless, few studies provide evidence of a similarly positive relationship with current employees' commitment (e.g. Brammer *et al.*, 2007; Peterson, 2004). Furthermore, no studies address a sustainable HRM approach, in which the primary concern is preserving employees' labor to balance the "consumption of resources"

(i.e. work execution and effort) and their regeneration (i.e. employability, skills/ qualifications, physical and mental health).

Accordingly, this paper makes several contributions to sustainable HRM and employer branding literature. First, this is, to the best of our knowledge, the first study to investigate if a sustainable HRM approach, as part of the employer brand, affects employees' brand commitment. Second, our findings extend prior research on employer branding and brand commitment by differentiating the organization's role from that of the supervisor regarding achieving brand commitment. Third, we focus on current employees and determine whether their perceived sustainable organizational support (PSOS) and their perceived sustainable supervisor support (PSSS) strengthen their brand commitment. Fourth, this study complements brand-based research in the consumer-company context (e.g. Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Currás-Pérez et al., 2009) by analyzing the relevant brand-based mediators that possibly underlie these relationships. Specifically, we examine the impacts of brand distinctiveness, brand prestige, and brand trust as potential mediators to clarify how PSOS and PSSS relate to employees' brand commitment. Drawing on marketing and HR literature, we develop a conceptual model of the direct and indirect effects of PSOS and PSSS on brand commitment, from which the hypotheses are derived. Figure 1 shows the conceptual model relevant to this paper.

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1 Sustainability as a psychological benefit

Ambler and Barrow (1996, p. 187) define the employer brand as "the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company." This understanding is consistent with an instrumental-symbolic framework that the marketing literature provides (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Lievens and Highhouse, 2003). Functional and economic benefits refer to instrumental benefits and describe employment's objective, tangible attributes (e.g. job characteristics, pay, advancement opportunities); conversely, psychological or symbolic benefits relate to subjective and intangible emotions toward the employer (e.g. as being innovative, honest) (Ambler and Barrow, 1996; Lievens and Highhouse, 2003). Together, functional, economic, and psychological benefits highlight an organization's individual personality and represent the unique image that employees associate with their employer (Lievens and Highhouse, 2003). Accordingly, the employer brand is presumed to provide the
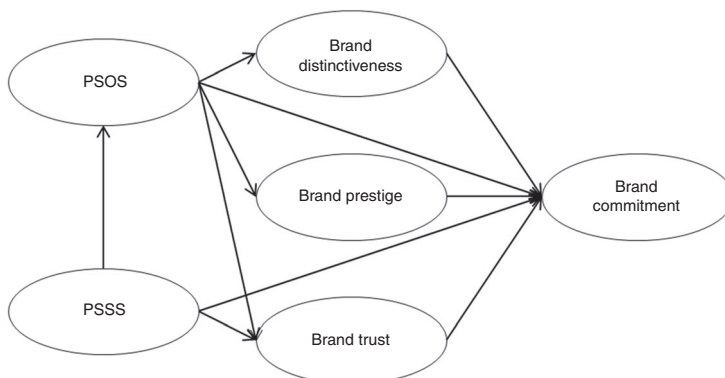

Figure 1.
Structural model

employee with a unique high-quality employment experience, enabling organizations to differentiate themselves from their competitors on the job market (Arachchige and Robertson, 2011; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Since it is often difficult for organizations to differentiate themselves with regard to functional and economic benefits from other employers in the same industry, psychological benefits tend to gain in importance (Arachchige and Robertson, 2011; Lievens and Highhouse, 2003). Lievens and Highhouse (2003) find that it is easier for potential applicants and experienced employees to differentiate between organizations on the basis of their symbolic attributes. Consequently, symbolic attributes take on greater importance in terms of explaining an organization's perceived attractiveness as an employer than do instrumental attributes. The latter outcome is due to symbolic attributes enabling potential and existing employees to maintain their self-identity, enhance their self-image, or engage in self-expression (Lievens, 2007).

We focus on sustainability in the HRM context in its role as a specific psychological benefit of the employer brand, in that it reflects whether employees actually perceive that their employer cares about them and about preserving their performance capability. In addition, sustainability has practices and strategies which have a positive impact on employee development and regeneration. This association occurs in the employee's mind and is based on subjective perceptions. In short, it is nothing more than employees' perception of the offer regarding sustainability in the HRM context. For example, employees might want to be a part of the organization, because it values its people, which reflects their self-concept. However, for the sustainable HRM approach to be a psychological benefit of the employer brand and for organizations to be associated as "sustainable" regarding their employees, they must provide an environment that creates a corresponding image among their current employees. If organizations succeed in doing so, the psychological character will be created in their employees' minds.

2.2 Impact of sustainable organizational support on brand commitment

According to organizational support theory, which Eisenberger *et al.* (1986) proposed, employees develop a general idea of the extent to which their employer appreciates their efforts and cares about their well-being, which constitute their perceived organizational support. In the HRM context, we complement perceived organizational support with sustainability. Therefore, PSOS refers to whether employees believe that their employer values them and cares about preserving the workforce to balance their consumption and regeneration. Sustainable work means that employees use their personal and professional resources to create the desired services or products while their employer simultaneously considers their needs and supports their regeneration and development (Kira and Lifvergren, 2014). The contrary would mean that employers consume and exploit their employees, which lead to stress and burnout, as well as decreasing productivity and organizational success.

Prior studies show that employees' perceptions of organizational supportiveness generate favorable outcomes for the organization, such as commitment (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986; Hutchison, 1997; Rhoades *et al.*, 2001). Commitment is an important component of any successful long-term relationship (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). In the context of employer branding, commitment refers to employees' attachment to their organization as an employer, as presented in its employer brand (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Thus, employer brand commitment corresponds to organizational commitment. Porter *et al.* (1974, p. 604) define organizational commitment as "the strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization."

This conceptualization is consistent with an affective interpretation of organizational commitment (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986). Affective commitment includes emotional attachment to an organization (Meyer and Allen, 1991) or, in this case, to the employer brand. This positive attitude toward the employer brand is assumed to positively influence employees' brand supporting behavior, encouraging them to act as ambassadors of the employer brand and promote the organization as a "great place to work" (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005).

According to organizational support theory, commitment arises from social exchange, as well as self-enhancement (Kurtessis *et al.*, 2015). In addition, social exchange theory and its underlying reciprocity norm, presume that perceived organizational support motivates employees to care about the organization's welfare and that they wish to reciprocate the favorable treatment to encourage similar actions in the future (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986; Gouldner, 1960). The organization's concern for its workforce's sustainability might therefore increase employees' positive feelings toward their employer, which should have a concomitant positive impact on their commitment to this employer (Meyer and Allen, 1991; Mowday *et al.*, 1979; Porter *et al.*, 1974). Furthermore, it is assumed that employees' commitment to the organization increases, because when employees feel that the organization values them, this helps them meet their need for affiliation. These employees can then incorporate organizational membership into their social identity and develop attachment or commitment to the organization (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). According to social identity theory, membership of different social groups, such as an employing organization, defines a person's self-concept (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Dutton *et al.*, 1994; Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Building on prior research, we therefore suggest that social identity theory can be used to explain employees' relationship with their employer brand (Lievens *et al.*, 2007; Maxwell and Knox, 2009). Since employees also personify brands, it is reasonable to predict that they develop relationships with them (Delgado-Ballester, 2004), in which sense the "employer can be seen as a brand with which the employee develops a closer relationship" (Ambler and Barrow, 1996, p. 185). Employees might experience positive outcomes in the form of an enhanced self-concept from a relationship based on PSOS, because the organization's efforts to preserve their work resources makes them feel that their employer values them – a relationship they would probably prefer to maintain. People strive to be members of groups that enhance their self-identity (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Dutton *et al.*, 1994; Tajfel and Turner, 1986), therefore PSOS is likely to generate employee commitment to the employer brand:

H1. PSOS has a positive effect on employees' brand commitment.

2.3 Brand distinctiveness

Lievens and Highhouse (2003) argue that it is not only relevant that certain attributes of an employer have a positive impact on employer brand-related outcomes, but also these attributes enable the organization to differentiate itself from other organizations and from its competitors. In this case, "distinctiveness serves to separate 'figure from ground,' differentiating the group from others and providing a unique identity" (Ashforth and Mael, 1989, p. 24). The employer brand seeks to provide a unique employment offer (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004), therefore its particularities should set it apart. Furthermore, according to social identity theory, people want to emphasize their differences in social contexts (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Dutton *et al.*, 1994; Tajfel and

Turner, 1986). Employees thus compare their organization with others; if their organization is positively distinguished, it enhances their self-concept. Since the job and time spent with the organization take up a considerable portion of the employee's life, we assume that it is especially important for employees to be able to express themselves, or, in other words, to emphasize differences in this context.

By communicating an organization's sustainability-oriented support it can establish a unique employment offering. For employees facing increasing work-related demands, organizations that balance labor consumption and regeneration should stand out from their competitors (Ehnert, 2009). The recent scandals in Germany concerning the way organizations deal with their employees (e.g. unauthorized employee monitoring, poor treatment of temporary workers) should also distinguish employers that value their employees from others. Thus, PSOS should help employers differentiate themselves positively from their competitors. In addition, employees would want to maintain their membership of such distinctive organizations to enhance their self-concept as an employee of a firm that preserves the workforce. Since the perceived distinctiveness of the brand image is likely to partially determine commitment to the employer brand, we posit:

H2a. PSOS has a positive effect on brand distinctiveness.

H2b. Brand distinctiveness has a positive effect on employees' brand commitment.

2.4 Brand prestige

According to social identity theory, people want to be evaluated positively. Dutton *et al.* (1994) maintain that people seek to satisfy their need for self-enhancement by identifying with prestigious organizations. Thus, being the employee of a positively perceived organization can enhance one's self-concept (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Dutton *et al.*, 1994). The prestige of an employer brand refers to "the perception a member of the organization has that other people, whose opinions are valued, believe that the organization is well-regarded [as an employer]" (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000, p. 561). Building on research in the consumer-company context (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Currás-Pérez *et al.*, 2009), we predict that PSOS has the potential to be evaluated as a symbol of prestige. As demands on the workforce change, a sustainable HRM approach may become increasingly appealing for employees. In this sense, it is reasonable to anticipate that employees believe that others also have a positive perception of PSOS, leading to an enhanced self-concept, because they perceive themselves as having the brand's positive attributes (e.g. valuing people). Further we posit that employees want to maintain a relationship with an employer that makes this possible; consequently, brand prestige should lead to commitment to the employer brand. That is:

H3a. PSOS has a positive effect on brand prestige.

H3b. Brand prestige has a positive effect on employees' brand commitment.

2.5 Brand trust

According to consumer contexts, brand trust is a substantial component of successful brands (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2002; Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán, 1999). In line with Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001, p. 82), we define trust in the employer brand as "the willingness of the average […] [employee] to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function." This definition refers to the degree to which an employee

believes that the employer brand fulfills what it promises and emphasizes the brand's reliability (Delgado-Ballester *et al.*, 2003). From a relationship marketing perspective, trust is the key element of any valuable long-term relationship (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Similar to consumers (Delgado-Ballester, 2004), employees are likely to develop relationships with their employer brand. This employee-brand relationship is likely to be critically important for most employees, because it represents a substantial element of their lives. In turn, a valuable relationship satisfies the needs of the employee, who expects continuity in this respect (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán, 1999). Since an employer brand based on sustainable organizational support is assumed to meet employee needs and to be poised to do so in the foreseeable future, it should increase brand trust.

Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán (1999) reinforce the importance of trust in the brand, which should in turn lead to brand commitment. Prior consumer studies confirm that brand trust affects brand commitment (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2002; Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán, 1999). In this sense, trust in the employer brand determines the employment relationship's persistence and contributes to commitment to the employer brand, which supports a long-term relationship (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán, 1999; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Similarly, organizational support theory and the underlying reciprocity norm indicate that people feel obligated to commit to their employer brand if they feel that their organization values them (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986; Gouldner, 1960). PSOS, which satisfies employees' needs and makes them feel that their employer values them, should lead to trust in the employer brand and, ultimately, to commitment:

H4a. PSOS has a positive effect on brand trust.

H4b. Brand trust has a positive effect on employees' brand commitment.

2.6 Effect of PSSS

Supervisors are likely to help establish a successful employer brand by activating it through their actions (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005; Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2005). Thus, the employer brand image probably reflects PSOS and PSSS. Supervisors "represent the personal actualization of the otherwise abstract, impersonal existence of the organization" (Wieseke *et al.*, 2009, p. 126). Direct supervisors are authorized to accommodate employees' needs; consequently, if they engage in actions that preserve employees' labor power, such employees perceive that they receive more sustainable support. These employees should also perceive supervisor actions as evidence of the organization's values. Kottke and Sharafinski (1988) propose that employees differentiate between support from the organization and that from their direct supervisor. Just as employees develop a general view of the organization's support, they also develop a general idea about whether their supervisor cares about them. We thus refer to PSSS, which reflects employees' perception that their supervisors are preserving their performance capability. As representatives of the organization, supervisors manifest organizational values; consequently, employees attribute their supervisors' support to the organization (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2002; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002; Rhoades *et al.*, 2001; Shanock and Eisenberger, 2006). Hence, we assume that PSSS is an antecedent of PSOS, because the supervisor's behavior appears to be indicative of the organization:

H5a. PSSS has a positive effect on PSOS.

Vallaster and de Chernatony (2005) state that supervisors who provide a clear brand vision have considerable impacts on brand commitment. Malatesta (1995) argues that the reciprocity norm causes the perceived supervisor support to increase employees' obligations toward their supervisor. Thus, employees who perceive that their supervisor acts in ways that support their sustainability are likely to show commitment to their employer. Moreover, on the basis of social identity theory, we assume that supervisors who exemplify sustainable support, and have a positive impact on employees' development and their regeneration, enhance the status of the employer. In turn, employees perceiving such support as a benefit of belonging to their employer, strengthen their brand commitment. In this sense, we anticipate a positive relationship between PSSS and brand commitment:

H5b. PSSS has a positive effect on employees' brand commitment.

Furthermore, we suggest that PSSS encourages trust in the employer brand, because brand trust develops through experience with the brand (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán, 1999). We assume that employees experience the employer brand in the relationship with their supervisor; consequently, they can directly evaluate whether their supervisor delivers the brand promise, which refers to the brand's reliability. If employees perceive that their direct supervisor supports them by preserving their work resources, this should have a positive effect on their trust in the employer brand:

H5c. PSSS has a positive effect on brand trust.

Finally, building brand trust is mainly the supervisor's responsibility. Employees interact with their supervisors, not with the more abstract organization, and thus trust this visible relationship. The impact of PSSS on brand trust should therefore be stronger than that of PSOS:

H5d. PSSS has a stronger impact on brand trust than PSOS does.

3. Methodology
3.1 Data collection and sample description
This research is part of a larger study conducted in Germany from May to November 2012. Developments such as the declining birth-rate and the aging workforce, which have led to a shortage of skilled labor, as well as the newly introduced quota for female employees, rising burnout rates, young and qualified employees for whom their work-life balance is very important, and high employment protection characterize the German labor market. In this context, sustainable HRM has become especially relevant (Ehnert, 2009; Ehnert *et al.*, 2014; Osranek and Zink, 2014). Our study focusses on current employees and seeks to include a broad, representative range of industries and organization sizes to enhance the results' external validity. The represented industries are: airport management (38.7 percent), automotive (24.1 percent), health care (11.7 percent), chemical (7.8 percent), finance/insurance (4.1 percent), research (4.1 percent), information technology (3.9 percent), food and beverages (2.7 percent), consulting (2.1 percent), and trade/services (0.8 percent). By examining a diverse sample, our study assesses how sustainable support affects all types of employees, thus gaining a sense of the general workforce. The final sample comprises 16 organizations and 3,016 employees. The number of people that each organization employs ranges from fewer than 50 to more than 5,000.

The number of participating employees varies between 22 and 624 per organization ($M = 188.5$, SD = 207.38). The employees' average age is 40.95 years (SD = 10.52), 63.4 percent are men, and 36.6 percent women. Furthermore, 35.4 percent of the employees completed vocational training, 32 percent have a university degree, 2.1 percent have doctoral degrees, and 30.5 percent indicated that their qualifications were below the degree level. The employees have worked for their current employer for an average of 11.45 years. With regard to their employment status, 73.8 percent were white collar worker, 10.1 percent had leadership responsibilities, 11.3 percent were blue collar workers, 2.6 percent were trainees, and 2.3 percent represented other categories.

3.2 Measures
All the measures were phrased in German; whenever possible, we used existing measures and adapted them to the underlying context. Unless otherwise noted, all the items were measured with seven-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree." Table AI presents the measures for each construct.

3.2.1 PSOS and PSSS. PSOS and PSSS both measure employees' perceptions of how supported they feel in terms of their performance capability's preservation by the organization and by their supervisor. To the best of our knowledge, no such scales were previously used; we therefore developed three items for each measure, corresponding to previous perceived organizational support studies (e.g. Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986). In line with prior research, similar measures were used for PSOS and PSSS (Kottke and Sharafinski, 1988; Rhoades *et al.*, 2001; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). However, to allow the respondents to clearly distinguish between PSOS and PSSS, the items corresponding to PSOS refer to the staff in general, whereas the items corresponding to PSSS refer to the supervisor's support of individual employees (e.g. "my organization would like to preserve the performance capability of its staff permanently" and "my supervisor would like to preserve my performance capability permanently").

3.2.2 Brand distinctiveness. We use three items that reflect an adapted version of the brand distinctiveness scale originally proposed by Bhattacharya and Sen (2003), and used by Currás-Pérez *et al.* (2009) in consumer contexts, to measure brand distinctiveness. The employees were asked to assess their employer in comparison with other employers. The following is an example of this item: "my employer differs from its competitors in dealing with its employees." The seven-point scale uses "very negative" (–3) and "very positive" (+3) as anchors.

3.2.3 Brand prestige. We measure brand prestige by using four items adapted from Mael and Ashforth (1992). An example of a statement in this scale is: "people around me have a positive image of my employer."

3.2.4 Brand trust. The items to measure employees' trust in the employer brand were adapted from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) and Delgado-Ballester *et al.* (2003). A typical item is: "my employer has never disappointed me."

3.2.5 Brand commitment. Brand commitment is measured with four items based on the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (Porter *et al.*, 1974), a well-established scale for measuring affective organizational commitment (O'Neill *et al.*, 2009). A typical item is: "I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career working for my employer."

3.2.6 Demographics. Questions related to age, gender, highest educational degree, duration of employment, and professional status completed the survey. We also control for the organization size, measured by the number of employees, and industry, using data gathered directly from the organizations.

4. Analysis and results

4.1 Analysis

Our sample consists of employees from different organizations, which means that we were obliged to consider a possible nested data structure to ensure an accurate measuring approach. The data in one organization might well be more similar than the data across the organizations. Our primary concern is the individual level (i.e. the individual perceptions of organizational actions), but ignoring a nested data structure can lead to incorrect conclusions (Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002). We calculated the intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC), which measure the ratio of variance between groups with the variance within groups, to determine if adjustments were needed (Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002). Table AI presents the ICCs of each investigated variable, which range from 0.03 to 0.14. The differences between the organizations therefore explain between 3 and 14 percent of the variance. According to Cohen *et al.* (2003), nested data still need to be considered, even at lower ICC values of 0.05 or 0.01, to avoid biased results. However, the purpose of this study is to control for the difference between organizations – that is, for the nested data structure – which is why we applied group mean centering (Enders and Tofighi, 2007, p. 128), which "removes all between-cluster [i.e. organizational level] variation from the predictor and yields a 'pure' estimate of the pooled within-cluster [i.e. individual level]." Group mean-centered variables no longer contain variation due to the different organizations; instead, the mean of each item is calculated for each company individually, after which the mean is subtracted from each measured value (Enders and Tofighi, 2007). Consequently, the newly calculated means of each item in each organization are zero. This approach enables us to consider the non-independence of the data on the individual level and control how the organizational-level affects relations at the employee level.

4.2 Measurement model

Using Mplus 7, we ran a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) containing all the constructs in the model to assess the measurement quality (Muthén and Muthén, 2012). Using the MLR estimator, we applied maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors. The overall fit indexes for the CFA met the commonly accepted standards: $\chi^2 = 1,322.420$, $p = 0.000$; comparative fit index (CFI) $= 0.97$; Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) $= 0.96$; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) $= 0.05$; and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) $= 0.03$. That is, the measurement model provided an overall acceptable fit with the data. The χ^2 statistic's significance at the 0.000 level may be due to the large sample size (3,016 cases) (MacCallum *et al.*, 1996). All the measures exceed the recommended Cronbach's α levels of 0.70, of 0.60 for composite reliability, and of 0.50 for average variance extracted (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988; Nunnally, 1978). We also assessed discriminant validity by examining whether each construct's average variance extracted was larger than the squared correlations between constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Table I presents the construct measures, CFA results, and scale correlations.

4.3 Common method variance

To control for common method bias, we applied the techniques proposed by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003): our survey instrument only contained general information about our study's objective and no clues about the relationships actually being examined. We assured the respondents that there were no wrong answers and that their

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. PSOS	1					
2. PSSS	0.612***	1				
3. Brand distinctiveness	0.671***	0.439***	1			
4. Brand prestige	0.675***	0.458***	0.673***	1		
5. Brand trust	0.784***	0.564***	0.703***	0.664***	1	
6. Brand commitment	0.686***	0.544***	0.723***	0.698***	0.767***	1
AVE	0.76	0.84	0.68	0.72	0.72	0.62
CR	0.90	0.94	0.87	0.91	0.91	0.87
α	0.91	0.94	0.87	0.91	0.91	0.87

Notes: AVE, average variance extracted; CR, composite reliability; α, Cronbach's α. Correlations are estimated as part of the CFA. ***$p = 0.000$ (two-tailed)

Table I.
Correlations, average
variance extracted,
composite reliability
and Cronbach's α

participation was voluntary. Confidentiality was also guaranteed in order to reduce the risk that the respondents would only provide socially desirable answers.

To test for common method variance, we compared the CFA model with an extended model that included a single latent common method factor that loaded equally on all the reflective variables and was uncorrelated with all the latent variables (Lindell and Whitney, 2001; Podsakoff et $al.$, 2003). This comparison resulted in the adapted model's marginally enhanced model fit ($\chi^2 = 1,296.785$, $p = 0.000$; CFI $= 0.97$; TLI $= 0.96$; RMSEA $= 0.05$; SRMR $= 0.03$). The χ^2 difference test ($\Delta\chi^2 = 10.82$, $p < 0.001$) indicates a significantly improved model fit (Satorra and Bentler, 2001). However, because χ^2 statistics are sensitive to sample size, we compared the global fit indices (CFI and TLI) and found that the models did not differ with respect to these values (Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1998). In addition, we determined the correlation coefficient between the latent variable correlations with and without the single latent common method factor, which resulted in a very high correlation ($r = 0.94$, $p = 0.000$; see also Bode et $al.$, 2011). In summary, common method variance does not seem to have had a significant impact on the results.

4.4 Hypotheses tests

To test the developed hypotheses, we again used Mplus 7 to build a structural model that included all the hypothesized effects. The results support the conclusion that the hypothesized model fits the data adequately: $\chi^2 = 1,333.924$, $p = 0.000$, CFI $= 0.97$, TLI $= 0.96$, RMSEA $= 0.05$, and SRMR $= 0.03$, as summarized in Table AII.

4.4.1 Direct effects. The findings show that PSOS exerts no impact on brand commitment ($\beta = -0.01$, ns); we therefore have to reject $H1$. In support of $H2a$, PSOS has a positive impact on brand distinctiveness ($\beta = 0.67$, $p = 0.000$). The results also reveal that brand distinctiveness exerts a positive effect on brand commitment ($\beta = 0.26$, $p = 0.000$), which supports $H2b$. In line with $H3a$, PSOS reveals a positive impact on brand prestige ($\beta = 0.68$, $p = 0.000$), and, as $H3b$ predicts, brand prestige has a positive impact on brand commitment ($\beta = 0.23$, $p = 0.000$). Furthermore, PSOS exerts a positive impact on brand trust ($\beta = 0.72$, $p = 0.000$), and brand trust relates positively to brand commitment ($\beta = 0.37$, $p = 0.000$), which support both of $H4$'s predictions.

In support of $H5a$, the findings show that PSSS relates directly to PSOS ($\beta = 0.62$, $p = 0.000$). The impact of PSSS on brand commitment confirms $H5b$ ($\beta = 0.12$, $p = 0.000$). PSSS also has a positive effect on brand trust ($\beta = 0.11$, $p = 0.000$), in line

with *H5c*. Finally, to test *H5d*, we compared the effect of PSOS and PSSS on brand trust in an unconstrained structural model against a model that constrains PSOS and PSSS to have an equal effect on brand trust to determine which effect is stronger. In support of our prediction, compared with PSOS, PSSS exerts a stronger effect on brand trust ($\Delta\chi^2 = 236.358$, $p < 0.001$).

4.4.2 Mediation analyses. We use bootstrapping (Preacher *et al.*, 2007) to test the indirect effects and apply the recommended bias-corrected bootstrapping (Preacher and Hayes, 2008) to adjust for bias in the bootstrap distribution, because the forced symmetry of the confidence interval can lead to incorrect assumptions (MacKinnon, 2008). The types of mediation are classified according to Zhao *et al.* (2010). First, beyond the direct effect of PSSS on brand trust ($\beta = 0.11$, $p = 0.000$), we find an indirect effect ($\beta = 0.44$, $p = 0.000$), indicating complementary mediation by PSOS. Second, we analyze the indirect effect of PSSS on brand commitment through PSOS. Other than the direct effect of PSSS though ($\beta = 0.12$, $p = 0.000$), we find no indirect effect on brand commitment ($\beta = -0.01$, ns), which indicates a direct-only non-mediation. Third, we analyze the indirect effect of PSSS on brand commitment, mediated by brand trust. In addition to the direct effect ($\beta = 0.12$, $p = 0.000$), we uncover an indirect effect ($\beta = 0.04$, $p = 0.000$), suggesting complementary mediation.

We also analyze the simultaneous mediating effects of brand distinctiveness, brand prestige, and brand trust between PSOS and brand commitment. This multiple mediation implies simultaneous mediation by multiple variables (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). By testing a multiple mediation model, we reduce the risk of omitted variable problems, which can affect simple mediator models. PSOS does not have a direct effect on brand commitment ($\beta = -0.01$, ns); we only find an indirect effect ($\beta = 0.60$, $p = 0.000$). These results therefore indicate indirect-only mediation. We also take a closer look at the specific indirect effects of PSOS on brand commitment. The indirect effect through brand distinctiveness is $\beta = 0.18$, that through brand prestige is $\beta = 0.15$, and the effect through brand trust is $\beta = 0.27$. The pairwise contrasts of the indirect effects, as described by Preacher and Hayes (2008), helps us determine if the sizes of the three effects differed significantly. These results indicate that the specific indirect effect through brand trust is greater than the specific indirect effects through brand distinctiveness and brand prestige; the indirect effect through brand prestige is the weakest of the three.

5. Discussion
5.1 Main conclusions
This study makes several contributions to employer branding literature. First, we demonstrate how PSOS enhances employees' brand commitment. Contrary to our prediction, PSOS does not directly affect brand commitment. Although PSOS exerts an effect on brand commitment, it is an indirect-only mediation, a finding that is not consistent with prior organizational support literature (Hutchison, 1997; Rhoades *et al.*, 2001). Nevertheless, the employees in this study do not directly convert PSOS into a sense of reciprocity. Nor can we confirm our prediction that PSOS directly enhances employees' self-concept, leading them to prefer to maintain the employer relationship. Our relatively generic measures might have caused respondents to think of the sustainable support of the overall workforce and not of themselves as individual employees. Thus, employees might not feel obligated to reciprocate general support for the whole workforce's sustainability. An alternative explanation might be that prior studies did not investigate the mediators of this relationship; which means they merely impute the total effect. Our findings suggest,

however, that the mere presence of PSOS is not enough to make employees feel committed to the employer brand. Other mechanisms also influence this relationship.

Second, by identifying and testing mediators, we add to the growing body of employer branding research and show that brand distinctiveness, brand prestige, and brand trust all mediate the relationship between PSOS and brand commitment. This indirect-only mediation implies that PSOS has no further direct effect on brand commitment (Zhao *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, our results affirm the theoretical argument that social identity is influential in the employer branding context, and especially to achieve brand commitment. By investigating the role that sustainability plays in the employer brand, we ascertain that this approach provides organizations with an opportunity to differentiate themselves from other employers and has great potential to retain current employees. As argued by Lievens and Highhouse (2003), many studies fail to measure whether the applied attributes actually differentiate between employers, despite the relevance of this aspect. Our results provide evidence that employees perceive PSOS as leading to greater positive differentiation of the employer brand from competing employers. This positive differentiation also influences employees' brand attachment positively. PSOS makes the brand more prestigious, leading employees to believe that others too have positive perceptions of their employer. This belief commits employees even more to the employer brand. In addition, our findings suggest that, consistent with prior research by Whitener (2001), who finds that trust mediates the relationship between perceived organizational support and commitment, PSOS has the potential to create brand trust. Finally, our findings determine that the indirect effect of brand trust has the strongest impact on brand commitment, thus supporting the relevance of brand trust in the employee-brand relationship, as well as prior research stating that trust is a major determinant of commitment (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

Third, our study extends prior sustainable HRM literature by differentiating between PSOS and PSSS. As expected, PSSS has a positive impact on PSOS. If employees perceive their supervisor as being engaged in maintaining their work resources, they believe this behavior is representative of the organization. However, we find no mediating effect of PSOS on the relationship between PSSS and brand commitment. This effect occurs only indirectly, through brand distinctiveness, brand prestige, and brand trust. In this respect, we only partially confirm the results of previous studies (Hutchison, 1997; Rhoades *et al.*, 2001). However, PSSS has a positive direct effect on brand commitment. This distinction could have arisen due to the slight wording differences in the measures of PSOS and PSSS. Another explanation reflects the possibility that supervisor support is more salient than a general feeling of organizational support. Employees usually have direct relationships with their supervisors, who communicate the organization's goals to employees, which might make them better able to evaluate their supervisors' support. These findings also support the prediction that employees feel obligated to reciprocate PSSS by committing to the employer brand, which might be due to this direct relationship with their supervisor being more visible. Since the supervisor is a representative of the employing organization, employees commit to the employer brand. In line with social identity theory, we assume that employees discern that PSSS enhances the status of their employer and therefore want to maintain this relationship.

Fourth, we investigate the relationship of PSSS and PSOS on brand trust. We find a complementary mediation of PSSS on brand trust through PSOS. Thus, PSSS shapes both PSOS and brand trust directly. Moreover, we compare the direct effects of PSOS

and PSSS; the latter exerts a stronger impact on brand trust than the former. This finding suggests that trust forms more powerfully in the direct relationship with the supervisor and less in the abstract relationship with the organization. PSSS also has an impact on PSOS, which has an impact on trust. Brand trust also partially mediates the relationship between PSSS and brand commitment. Thus, the supervisor clearly has a substantial role to play in encouraging trust in the employer brand.

5.2 Managerial implications

These findings have various implications for practice. Although a strong employer brand is assumed to attract and retain employees, surprisingly little research has investigated how it supports employers in maintaining their relationship with employees. Furthermore, the role that a sustainable HRM approach plays in retaining employees has not been empirically confirmed. Our findings provide guidance for understanding how to encourage commitment to the employer brand: organizations should integrate a sustainable HRM approach as a specific psychological benefit, because it offers organizations a means to not only sustain their workforce, but also to promote a clear vision of what distinguishes them from other employers. To raise this awareness, organizations should communicate their intentions with regard to preserving their workforce through targeted brand-building campaigns on their homepage, brochures, or social networks.

Furthermore, organizations should address a sustainable HRM approach, because it increases brand distinctiveness and brand prestige from the perspective of current employees, thereby strengthening employees' commitment to the employer brand. In this sense, such an HRM approach satisfies employees' self-definitional needs, allowing them to believe that the organization cares about maintaining its workforce. Ultimately, such an HRM approach leads employees to become more attached to their employer brand. Organizations must, however, specifically acknowledge the importance of brand trust, because it is an important mediator of the employee-brand relationship. PSOS determines the strength of employee trust in the brand and relationships based on trust are highly valued, which means employees are likely to commit to the brand. These findings indicate that organizations must not only thoroughly promote sustainable organizational support, but also live up to their promises. Unrealistic descriptions can create mistrust and hinder commitment to the brand. Within the framework of the psychological contract, employees recognize mutual obligations between themselves and their employers, if the psychological contract is breached, they may withdraw from the organization (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994), causing it to lose a critical source of sustained competitive advantage. On the basis of our results, we therefore call on organizations to invest in practices and work conditions that help employees perceive their organization as being interested in preserving the workforce. In this context, company workshops could help specify employees' needs and expectations regarding the sustainability of their resources.

Because supervisors have an important impact on creating trust in the employer brand, which is in turn critical for establishing commitment, supervisors in particular should work to create a supportive, sustainable culture for their employees. If employees believe that their supervisor is interested in maintaining their labor, this enhances their PSOS and increases trust in the employer brand. Thus, supervisors also need to deliver on the brand promise to ensure brand reliability. An organization might claim to support the preservation of its employees' performance capability, but they are likely to remain unaware of this goal if their supervisor never engages in

supportive actions. In keeping with its employees' demands for sustainable support, organizations thus need to train their supervisors to convey the desired impression. Finally, it is noteworthy that PSSS has a direct impact on brand commitment. Supervisors must thus live the brand, which will encourage employees to show brand commitment and act as brand ambassadors (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005), positively influencing other current or potential employees.

5.3 Limitations and further research
Some of this study's limitations also provide opportunities for further research. By gathering a diverse sample to assess how sustainable support affects all types of employees, we gain a view of the general workforce, but the cross-sectional research design makes it difficult to infer causal relationships. As Rhoades *et al.* (2001) state, the employee-employer relationship is likely to be dynamic. Conducting longitudinal studies to investigate how impressions of the employer brand develop over time and how commitment to the brand might change, should therefore be interesting. Additional data, collected directly from organizations (e.g. turnover rates) could also provide a more objective impression of commitment to the employer brand. Our results originate solely from employee self-assessments, which might cause concern, although our focus was on employees' individual perceptions. The national context is also likely to play a role in our findings (e.g. the high employment protection that characterizes the German labor market). Gathering data from other countries would therefore be interesting.

Furthermore, although we address general perceived sustainable treatment, other, more specific, HR practices, including those related to work-life balance, health care, or employability issues, might influence perceptions of sustainable support (Ehnert, 2009). The PSOS and PSSS scales could be developed further to broaden the scope in order to analyze the impact of detailed sustainable HRM approaches on the employer brand. Our study seeks to examine whether employees actually do perceive organizations and supervisors as acting in sustainable ways, but we did not investigate whether organizations actually communicate their sustainable HRM approach as a unique aspect of their employer brand. It would be interesting for further research to compare employees' perceptions of a sustainable HRM with the practices actually offered and communicated through HRM.

We differentiate PSOS and PSSS and find that the latter is dominant as a means to achieve brand trust and commitment. In this context, it would be interesting to investigate which types of leadership generate trust and commitment most effectively, as well as whether a current employee's commitment influences potential employees to seek employment with that organization.

6. Conclusion
In employer branding research, most attention has focussed on factors that make employers attractive, not on what makes current employees commit to the employer brand. We investigate if and how PSOS and PSSS enhance commitment to the employer brand among employees in settings in which organizations depend on highly qualified, motivated workforces. By considering current employees and their commitment to the employer brand, this study takes an insider view and sheds new light on how an employer brand based on sustainable HRM can achieve commitment, as well as how several mediators affect this link. We also differentiate carefully between the influence of PSOS and PSSS to investigate how these different image

influences affect employee-brand commitment. Contrary to prior literature, the research results indicate that PSOS has no direct effect on brand commitment. We argue that the relationship is more complex, because brand distinctiveness, brand prestige, and brand trust mediate the relationship and brand trust seems to be an especially important mediator in this context. PSSS appears more relevant for encouraging trust than is PSOS, and unlike this measure, PSSS has a direct impact on brand commitment. Overall, these findings provide new insights into how the employer brand is formed and they provide a richer understanding of how PSOS and PSSS can lead employees to commit to their employer's brand.

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(The Appendix follows overleaf.)

Appendix

Measurement items	Factor loading	ICC
PSOS		
My organization is interested in a long-term working relationship with its employees	0.81	0.12
My organization views its employees as valuable resources	0.92	0.12
My organization would like to preserve the productivity of its staff permanently	0.88	0.08
PSSS		
My supervisor is interested in a long-term working relationship with me	0.91	0.03
My organization sees me as a valuable resource	0.92	0.03
My supervisor would like to preserve my productivity permanently	0.92	0.03
Brand distinctiveness		
My employer is different from other employers in the industry	0.85	0.09
My employer stands out from other employers	0.87	0.11
My employer differs from its competitors in dealing with its employees	0.76	0.09
Brand prestige		
People around me have a positive image of my employer	0.87	0.13
In general, my employer is highly respected/considered one of the best employers	0.87	0.14
Among the people around me, the company I work for is considered to have a good reputation as an employer	0.92	0.12
Around me, It is considered prestigious to be an employee of the company I work for	0.73	0.08
Brand trust		
My employer has never disappointed me	0.79	0.08
My employer is fair	0.87	0.07
My employer guarantees satisfied employees	0.85	0.11
I can rely on my employer	0.89	0.11
Brand commitment		
I feel high loyalty to my employer	0.85	0.05
I stand behind the goals and values of my employer	0.82	0.05
I am glad that I chose to work for my employer	0.82	0.06
I would be very happy to keep working for this organization for the rest of my professional career	0.65	0.05

Table AI.
Construct measures, factor loadings, and intraclass correlation coefficients

Notes: ICC, intraclass correlation coefficients. All factor loadings are significant at $p = 0.000$ (two-tailed)

		Standard β
Direct effects		
H1	PSOS → brand commitment	−0.01 ns
H2a	PSOS → brand distinctiveness	0.67***
H2b	Brand distinctiveness → brand commitment	0.26***
H3a	PSOS → brand prestige	0.68***
H3b	Brand prestige → brand commitment	0.23***
H4a	PSOS → brand trust	0.72***
H4b	Brand trust → brand commitment	0.37***
H5a	PSSS → PSOS	0.62***
H5b	PSSS → brand commitment	0.12***
H5c	PSSS → brand trust	0.11***
Mediating effects		
	PSSS → PSOS → brand trust	0.44***
	PSSS → PSOS → brand commitment	−0.01 ns
	PSSS → brand trust → brand commitment	0.04***
Simultaneous mediating effects		
	PSOS → brand distinctiveness → brand commitment	0.60***
	brand prestige	
	brand trust	
R^2		
	PSOS	0.38
	Brand distinctiveness	0.45
	Brand prestige	0.46
	Brand trust	0.63
	Brand commitment	0.69

Notes: ns, not significant. ***$p = 0.000$ (two-tailed)

Table AII.
Results