Recruitment-Related Information Sources and Organizational Attractiveness: Can Something Be Done About Negative Publicity?

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The present study begins to fill a gap in the recruitment literature by investigating whether the effects of negative publicity on organizational attractiveness can be mitigated by recruitment advertising and positive word-of-mouth. The accessibility–diagnosticity model was used as a theoretical framework to formulate predictions about the effects of these recruitment-related information sources. A mixed $2 \times 2$ experimental design was applied to examine whether initial assessments of organizational attractiveness based on negative publicity would improve at a second evaluation after exposure to a second, more positive information source. We found that both recruitment advertising and word-of-mouth improved organizational attractiveness, but word-of-mouth was perceived as a more credible information source. Self-monitoring did not moderate the impact of information source on organizational attractiveness.

Negative publicity about companies has become rather common in this media era and is likely to have pervasive effects on company sales and stock prices (Abowd, Milkovich, & Hannon, 1990; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). In addition, negative media attention might also scare off potential applicants. Who would want to work for a company that has received extensive press coverage on its accounting blunders (e.g., Enron), environmental disasters (e.g., Exxon), or massive lay-offs (e.g., Ford)? However, no research has as yet studied the effects of negative publicity on organizational attractiveness. Furthermore, it is not known whether these effects are irreparable or not: can companies mitigate the impact of negative publicity by influencing potential applicants’ perceptions of organizational attractiveness through other information sources?

The present study begins to fill this gap in the recruitment literature by advancing our understanding of negative publicity and investigating whether its effects on organizational attractiveness can be reduced by two very different kinds of recruitment-related information sources: recruitment advertising and word-of-mouth. The accessibility–diagnosticity model (Feldman & Lynch, 1988; Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991) was used as a theoretical framework to formulate predictions about the effects of these information sources. At a practical level, our findings might be helpful for recruiters trying to decrease the impact of negative publicity on their company’s attractiveness as an employer.

Recruitment-Related Information Sources

In order to enhance organizational attractiveness, recruitment often involves a procedure wherein a particular message about the organization as an employer is communicated to a target group of (potential) applicants through a specific channel or source (Barber, 1998). This implies that recruitment-related information sources and their characteristics can be important antecedents of organizational attractiveness. In addition to internal recruitment sources (e.g., recruitment advertising), which are largely under the control of the organization, job seekers also receive...

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information from external sources (e.g., publicity and word-of-mouth), which are not under the direct control of the organization. However, research on the effects of these external information sources on organizational attractiveness is still scarce. Furthermore, most recruitment studies have examined the effects of only one information source at a time, so little is known about the effects of multiple information sources on organizational attractiveness (Cable & Turban, 2001; Collins & Han, 2004; Collins & Stevens, 2002). This contrasts sharply with the reality of job seeking where potential applicants frequently consult external sources and obtain their information from more than one source. Similarly, companies are likely to monitor and try to influence external sources and include a mixture of information sources in their recruitment strategy. Therefore, the present study examines the effects of two external information sources (i.e., publicity and word-of-mouth) and one internal source (i.e., recruitment advertising) on organizational attractiveness. We now turn to a discussion of these three recruitment-related information sources, which is summarized in Table 1.

**Publicity**

Publicity as a recruitment-related information source involves information about an organization as an employer disseminated through editorial media not paid for by the organization (Collins & Stevens, 2002). It typically consists of non-personal mass communication such as newspaper articles and TV news items, and can contain both positive and negative information. Publicity is an external source, which means that companies can only try to manage it indirectly through public relations efforts, press releases, press conferences, media interviews, public-service activities, or special events. Almost no research has studied publicity as a recruitment-related information source. Collins and Stevens (2002) found that positive publicity was positively related to organizational attractiveness and strengthened the effects of other recruitment sources. However, negative publicity was not examined.

**Recruitment Advertising**

Recruitment advertising can be defined as any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of an organization as an employer by the organization itself (Kotler, 2000). Examples include job postings and recruitment brochures. The definition implies that advertising is an internal source that can be directly managed by the organization to communicate a positive message to potential applicants. However, recruitment advertising is usually rather expensive, because advertising space (e.g., in newspapers) must be purchased. In contrast to external sources, recruitment advertising has received a considerable amount of research attention, demonstrating that physical ad attributes, salary and benefits, location, human resource systems, social consciousness, value statements, and position scarcity influence organizational attractiveness (Barber & Roehling, 1993; Brez & Judge, 1994; Highhouse, Beadle, Gallo, & Miller, 1998; Highhouse & Hoffman, 2001; Highhouse, Hoffman, Greve, & Collins, 2002). However, most of these studies have investigated recruitment advertising as a single recruitment source. Therefore, it is not known whether advertising can serve as a tool to mitigate the effects of negative external sources. Along these lines, Van Hoye and Lievens (2004) found that organizational attractiveness increased significantly when negative word-of-mouth was followed by recruitment advertising.

**Word-of-Mouth**

In a recruitment context, word-of-mouth involves interpersonal communication, independent of the organization’s recruitment activities, about an organization as an employer or about specific jobs (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2004). Examples are conversations with friends and advice from college professors. Word-of-mouth can contain both positive and negative information, and represents an external source. Like publicity, companies can only attempt to control it indirectly through campus recruitment, building relationships with key influentials and opinion leaders (e.g., career counselor, class president), employee referrals (and referral bonuses), testimonials, or internships. Only a few studies have examined word-of-mouth as a recruitment-related information source. Collins and Stevens (2002) found a strong effect of positive word-of-mouth on organizational attractiveness. The effect of word-of-mouth was strengthened by positive publicity, but word-of-mouth did not interact with recruitment advertising or sponsorship. Van Hoye and Lievens (2004) found that both positive and negative word-of-mouth influenced organizational attractiveness and interfered with the effectiveness of recruitment advertising. However, negative word-of-mouth had a larger impact than positive word-of-mouth. So far, no research has examined whether positive word-of-mouth can be used to reduce the impact of negative external information sources.

**Table 1. Main characteristics of recruitment-related information sources**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Publicity</th>
<th>Recruitment Advertising</th>
<th>Word-of-mouth</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>External</td>
<td>Internal Non-personal</td>
<td>External Personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Non-personal</td>
<td>Non-personal Positive</td>
<td>Positive/ negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valence</td>
<td>Positive/</td>
<td></td>
<td>Inexpensive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Costs</td>
<td>Inexpensive</td>
<td>Expensive Moderate</td>
<td>Scarce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Scarce</td>
<td>amount</td>
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The Accessibility–Diagnosticity Model of Information Sources

On the basis of the main characteristics of publicity, recruitment advertising, and word-of-mouth (see Table 1), we use the accessibility–diagnosticity model as a theoretical framework to formulate specific predictions about the effects of these recruitment-related information sources on organizational attractiveness.

The accessibility–diagnosticity model (Feldman & Lynch, 1988; Herr et al., 1991) posits that the likelihood that information is used to base an evaluation upon is determined by the accessibility of that information in memory, the diagnosticity of that information, and by the accessibility and diagnosticity of other information. An information source is perceived as diagnostic if it helps to discriminate between alternative hypotheses, interpretations, or categorizations. In other words, a recruitment-related information source is diagnostic if it helps potential applicants to decide whether a specific organization would be a good or a bad employer for them.

In the present study, we wanted to investigate whether recruitment advertising and positive word-of-mouth could mitigate the effects of negative publicity on organizational attractiveness. On the basis of the accessibility–diagnosticity model, we expected both recruitment advertising and word-of-mouth to be sufficiently diagnostic as a second information source after negative publicity to be able to enhance perceptions of organizational attractiveness. First, publicity usually provides rather general information about an organization as an employer because of its external and non-personal nature (Collins & Stevens, 2002). This leaves ample room for recruitment advertising and word-of-mouth to provide more specific diagnostic information about important job and organizational characteristics, which is likely to influence the perceptions of potential applicants. This higher diagnosticity is possible as a result of, respectively, the internal and personal features of recruitment advertising and word-of-mouth. Second, negative publicity creates a negative recruitment environment, in which positive recruitment advertising and word-of-mouth are probably perceived as more diagnostic than they would have been in an already positive environment, because they “stand out” more in a predominantly negative context (cf., Herr et al., 1991).

Prediction 1: Recruitment advertising will enhance organizational attractiveness perceived by potential applicants who are initially exposed to negative publicity.

Prediction 2: Positive word-of-mouth will enhance organizational attractiveness perceived by potential applicants who are initially exposed to negative publicity.

Furthermore, the accessibility–diagnosticity model predicts that the impact of positive word-of-mouth on organizational attractiveness would be larger than that of equally positive recruitment advertising. Although the two information sources might be evenly diagnostic, word-of-mouth is more easily accessible in memory because of its personal and more vivid nature and thus more likely to enhance the perceptions of potential applicants (Feldman & Lynch, 1988; Herr et al., 1991).

Prediction 3: Positive word-of-mouth will enhance organizational attractiveness to a greater extent than recruitment advertising.

However, in accordance with a person–organization fit perspective (Kristof, 1996) and with the individual differences hypothesis in recruitment source research (Zottoli & Wanous, 2000), we expected that this source effect on organizational attractiveness would be moderated by individual differences. As word-of-mouth represents an interpersonal information source, we anticipated that its effects on organizational attractiveness would be greater for potential applicants high in self-monitoring, because they are more susceptible to social information (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). High and low self-monitors were not expected to differ in their reactions to recruitment advertising. Along these lines, Kilduff (1992) found that self-monitoring moderated the relationship between friendship ties and similarity of interview bidding patterns of MBA students, so that high self-monitors were more similar to their friends in their bidding behavior than low self-monitors.

Prediction 4: Positive word-of-mouth will enhance organizational attractiveness to a greater extent for potential applicants high in self-monitoring than for potential applicants low in self-monitoring.

Finally, we examined the perceived credibility of recruitment advertising and word-of-mouth. Credibility is an important characteristic of recruitment-related information sources that influences how they are processed. In general, potential applicants seem to prefer obtaining information from credible sources (Cable & Turban, 2001; Fisher, Ilgen, & Hoyer, 1979). As word-of-mouth is an external information source, we anticipated that it would be perceived by potential applicants as more credible and trustworthy than recruitment advertising, because it does not have the explicit purpose of promoting the organization (Fisher et al., 1979). Furthermore, as credibility is thought to affect the processing of information sources, we expected it to mediate the predicted source effect on organizational attractiveness (Allen, Van Scotter, & Otondo, 2004).

Prediction 5a: Word-of-mouth will be perceived as a more credible information source than recruitment advertising.

Prediction 5b: Credibility will mediate the differential effect of recruitment advertising and word-of-mouth on organizational attractiveness.
Method

Participants

Participants were 100 graduate students in I/O psychology who were given extra course credit for their participation. The majority of the sample was female (75%), and the mean age was 22 years (SD = 1.27). All of the participants had part-time work experience, and 97% had experience in applying for a job (with an average of seven previous applications), so the task of evaluating organizational attractiveness was realistic and relevant for them. As most participants would be looking for a job similar to the position used in this study (Human Resources Coordinator) within the next few months (either for an internship or for a full-time job), we considered them to be potential applicants or a sample from the applicant population (Barber, 1998).

Design and Procedure

An experimental approach enabled us to manipulate the content of all information sources, which would have been almost impossible to achieve in a field study. More specifically, a mixed $2 \times 2$ experimental design was applied, incorporating both within- and between-subjects components. Time was a within-subjects factor as we investigated whether initial assessments of organizational attractiveness based on negative publicity would improve at a second evaluation after exposure to a second, more positive information source. Information source was a between-subjects factor as participants were exposed to either recruitment advertising or positive word-of-mouth as a second source. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two levels of the between-subjects factor.

First, participants were exposed to negative publicity and rated organizational attractiveness for the first time. Second, either recruitment advertising or word-of-mouth was shown and organizational attractiveness was assessed a second time. Finally, participants evaluated the credibility of the second information source, filled out the self-monitoring scale, and answered some demographical questions.

Materials

Materials consisted of three recruitment-related information sources about a position of Human Resources Coordinator in a fictitious company Geropress, namely negative publicity, recruitment advertising, and positive word-of-mouth. The position was tailored to the interests and skills of our sample of graduate I/O psychology students.

Publicity was operationalized as a newspaper article about Geropress and was the same in both conditions. It was designed to present negative information about the company. More specifically, the newspaper article stated that because of economic downturn, the company would be restructured and that layoffs were imminent. To enable a realistic first assessment of organizational attractiveness, some other neutral/positive attribute information was provided as well, namely location, industry, and size. Because of concerns of external validity, the publicity was designed on the basis of real newspaper articles about restructuring companies. Moreover, it was presented on a page laid out like an actual newspaper page amidst other articles (participants were instructed to read the encircled article).

Recruitment advertising was manipulated as a job advertisement from Geropress. Its layout resembled the typical structure found in real job ads, consisting of the description of the company, job title, job content, company offer, candidate requirements, and contact information.

Word-of-mouth was operationalized as a casual conversation between two friends about the company as an employer. To resemble the personal and vivid nature of word-of-mouth while still maintaining control over the content of the information source, the conversation was presented in a video format. Participants were instructed that the video presentation represented a conversation they had about the company with a friend. One person in the video, a graduate student in I/O psychology looking for a job, asked the other person, who worked as an I/O psychologist for another company, questions about Geropress. The camera zoomed in on the person providing information about the company.

Recruitment advertising and word-of-mouth were carefully designed to provide equally positive and attractive information about the same job and organizational attributes to ensure that the source effects obtained would be result of differences in source characteristics and not the amount, type, or valence of the provided information (Herr et al., 1991). A number of information categories were identified that typically appear in recruitment-related information sources and influence organizational attractiveness, namely location, industry, size, salary and benefits, career opportunities, educational prospects, and job content (Barber & Roehling, 1993; Bretz & Judge, 1994; Feldman & Arnold, 1978; Fisher et al., 1979; Highhouse & Hoffman, 2001). These categories were manipulated similarly in both recruitment advertising and word-of-mouth based on descriptions of actual Human Resources positions.

The design of the materials was evaluated in a pre-study among 53 graduate I/O psychology students (10 men, 43 women; mean age = 21 years), who were asked to judge the valence, attractiveness, and realism of one of the three recruitment-related information sources. Word-of-mouth was presented as a written scenario so that adjustments would still be possible before the actual recording of the video conversation. Table 2 shows that recruitment advertising and word-of-mouth did not differ in valence...
Table 2. Evaluation of materials in pre-study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Publicity (n = 18)</th>
<th></th>
<th>Word-of-mouth (n = 16)</th>
<th></th>
<th>Recruitment advertising (n = 19)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valence</td>
<td>3.24&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>5.63&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>5.49&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractiveness</td>
<td>3.72&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>5.21&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>5.47&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realism</td>
<td>5.54&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>4.88&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>5.25&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
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</table>

*Note: N = 53. Valence and realism were rated on a 7-point bipolar scale, with higher scores indicating more positive and more realistic evaluations. Attractiveness was rated on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 = completely disagree to 7 = completely agree. Means in the same row that do not share subscripts differ at p < .05 in the Tukey honestly significant difference comparison.*

and attractiveness. Publicity was perceived to be significantly more negative and less attractive than the other two sources. Finally, no significant differences in perceptions of realism were observed between publicity, recruitment advertising, and word-of-mouth.

**Measures**

Organizational attractiveness. Perceived attractiveness of the organization as an employer was assessed using a five-item scale from Turban and Keon (1993). An example item is “I would like to work for Geropress.” These items were rated on a 7-point rating scale, ranging from 1 = completely disagree to 7 = completely agree. The internal consistency of this scale was .89 for the first assessment and .93 for the second assessment.

Credibility. Based on previous research (Coleman & Irving, 1997; Fisher et al., 1979; Highhouse et al., 2002), we developed five items for measuring the perceived credibility of an information source. The formulation of the items was adapted to ensure that the same scale could be used to measure the credibility of both recruitment advertising and word-of-mouth. An example item is “I think [the job advertisement] was telling the truth.” All items were rated on a 7-point rating scale, ranging from 1 = completely disagree to 7 = completely agree. The internal consistency of the scale was .93 for recruitment advertising and .95 for word-of-mouth.

Self-monitoring. Self-monitoring was assessed with the revised 18-item form of the Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). An example item is “I would probably make a good actor.” Items were rated on a 4-point rating scale, ranging from 1 = completely false to 4 = completely true. As self-monitoring is essentially a dichotomous variable (Gangestad & Snyder, 1985), we followed guidelines to recode items into two categories (0 = false; 1 = true), and to apply a median split to identify high and low self-monitors (<9 = low; ≥9 = high). The internal consistency of the scale was .78.

**Results**

Table 3 presents the means and standard deviations of the study’s dependent variables broken down by the experimental factors time and information source. A three-way mixed ANOVA was conducted to examine the effects of time, information source, and self-monitoring on organizational attractiveness. Time had a strong main effect on organizational attractiveness, F(1, 96) = 105.47, p < .001, partial η² = .52, as organizational attractiveness increased significantly from time 1 to time 2. The interaction of time and information source was not significant, F(1, 96) = .71, p = .40, partial η² = .01, indicating that recruitment advertising and word-of-mouth enhanced organizational attractiveness after negative publicity to the same extent. Therefore, we found that both recruitment advertising and positive word-of-mouth mitigated the effects of negative publicity on organizational attractiveness, in line with Predictions 1 and 2 derived from the accessibility–diagnosticity model. However, word-of-mouth did not enhance organizational attractiveness to a greater extent than recruitment advertising, failing to support Prediction 3.

The three-way interaction of time, information source, and self-monitoring was not significant, F(1, 96) = .24, p = .62, partial η² = .00. This implies that both information sources enhanced organizational attractiveness after negative publicity to the same extent for high self-monitors than for low self-monitors. Contrary to Prediction 4, we did not find that word-of-mouth enhanced organizational attractiveness to a greater extent than recruitment advertising. Therefore, we found that both recruitment advertising and positive word-of-mouth mitigated the effects of negative publicity on organizational attractiveness, in line with Predictions 1 and 2 derived from the accessibility–diagnosticity model. However, word-of-mouth did not enhance organizational attractiveness to a greater extent than recruitment advertising, failing to support Prediction 3.

A one-way ANOVA indicated that information source had a moderately strong effect on credibility, F(1, 98) = 11.23, p = .001, partial η² = .10. In support of Prediction 5a, we found that word-of-mouth was perceived as more credible than recruitment advertising. To test whether credibility mediated the effect of information source on organizational attractiveness, we followed the three-step procedure for analyzing the mediating effects advocated by Baron and Kenny (1986). However, as we failed to find a
Table 3. Means and standard deviations of dependent variables by time and information source

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Source</th>
<th>Time 1</th>
<th>Time 2</th>
<th>Time 1</th>
<th>Time 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recruitment advertising (n = 50)</td>
<td>Word-of-mouth (n = 50)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Attractiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>4.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N=100. Attractiveness and credibility were rated on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 = completely disagree to 7 = completely agree.

Discussion

To our knowledge, the present study was the first to investigate negative publicity as a recruitment-related information source, and thus begins to fill this gap in the recruitment literature. Furthermore, the effects of publicity followed by a second information source on organizational attractiveness were examined, adding to the scarce body of knowledge on multiple source effects. More specifically, we investigated whether recruitment advertising and positive word-of-mouth can be used to enhance organizational attractiveness perceived by potential applicants after being exposed to negative publicity.

Our results suggest that something can be done about the effects of negative publicity on organizational attractiveness. By exposing potential applicants to either recruitment advertising or positive word-of-mouth as a second information source after negative publicity, their perceptions of organizational attractiveness improved considerably. It seems that these additional information sources were sufficiently diagnostic to alter the evaluations of potential applicants (Feldman & Lynch, 1988; Herr et al., 1991). Contrary to our expectations, positive word-of-mouth did not enhance organizational attractiveness to a greater extent than recruitment advertising, nor did self-monitoring moderate this relationship. It might be that the diagnosticity of both information sources was so high that their accessibility did not matter very much. Along these lines, the accessibility–diagnosticity framework proposes that accessible information is not used when more diagnostic information is available (Simmons, Bickart, & Lynch, 1993), indicating that highly diagnostic information is preferred over highly accessible information. Future research should investigate whether recruitment advertising and word-of-mouth can have a differential effect on organizational attractiveness when they are less diagnostic, i.e., when they contain less information about important job and organizational attributes.

Furthermore, future studies should examine whether other variables such as the Big Five personality factors can help to explain individual differences in the processing and effectiveness of recruitment sources, as well as whether self-monitoring can moderate source effects in other contexts. For instance, although self-monitoring was not related to the processing of the information sources enforced in the present study, it might affect individual source preferences when potential applicants are given the choice of which information sources to use.

Although credibility did not mediate the effect of information source on organizational attractiveness, word-of-mouth was perceived as more credible than recruitment advertising. This might indicate that the two sources were cognitively processed in a different way (Cable & Turban, 2001). In terms of the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984), credibility of the information source might be a factor influencing potential applicants to process the information more centrally, leading to greater and more enduring changes in attitudes and behavior than peripherally processed information. Supposing that word-of-mouth is processed more centrally than recruitment advertising because of its higher credibility, we would not expect evaluations of organizational attractiveness to differ after a short time interval, like in the present study, because both sources contained good arguments as well as positive peripheral cues. However, we would expect attitude change based on word-of-mouth to be more thorough and long-lasting, which would be supported by a differential effect of recruitment advertising and word-of-mouth on long-term assessments of organizational attractiveness. Future research should test these assumptions by measuring organizational attractiveness at longer time intervals after recruitment advertising and word-of-mouth, and by examining whether credibility mediates the effects of these information sources on long-term organizational attractiveness.

As organizational attractiveness was not measured before negative publicity, we cannot determine whether recruitment advertising and word-of-mouth merely mitigated part of the effect of negative publicity or whether they completely nullified it. An alternative approach might provide a preliminary answer to this issue. If we compare the experimental groups from our main study (see Table 3) with the control groups from our pre-study (see Table 2), an independent-samples t-test shows that organizational attractiveness after negative publicity and recruitment...
advertising was significantly lower than after recruitment advertising alone, \( t(60) = -3.35, \ p = .00, \eta^2 = .14 \). This suggests that although recruitment advertising diminished the effect of negative publicity, it could not cancel it out entirely. Another independent-samples \( t \)-test revealed that organizational attractiveness after negative publicity and word-of-mouth did not differ significantly from organizational attractiveness after word-of-mouth alone, \( t(64) = -1.33, \ p = .19, \eta^2 = .03 \), suggesting that word-of-mouth succeeded in nullifying the impact of negative publicity. Although this additional analysis should be interpreted cautiously, it implies that future research on the effects of multiple recruitment-related information sources should include baseline measures of organizational attractiveness to explore this matter more intensively.

This study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the experimental design of our study allowed us to manipulate carefully the content and timing of all information sources, but unfortunately it also limits the generalizability of the results. However, it would have been very difficult to investigate our specific research questions in a field study. For instance, we would have needed to find out which companies were about to appear negatively in the press, be able to develop parallel information sources, and test these on similar, but separate potential applicant samples. Future field studies might take a macro-level approach and examine retrospectively how various companies have dealt with negative publicity. Additionally, future research is needed to examine whether our results can be generalized to other applicant populations, organizations, and information sources. For instance, it might be that potential applicants with more work experience would react differently to negative publicity. Along these lines, Bretz and Judge (1998) observed that less experienced job seekers placed more weight on negative information than more experienced job seekers. Furthermore, Fombrun and Shanley (1990) found that the level of organizational diversification moderated the effects of media exposure on corporate reputation, implying that the effects of publicity on organizational attractiveness might not be the same for all types of organizations. Moreover, in the current study we operationalized negative publicity as a single newspaper article about lay-offs at a restructuring company that was moderately negative, as the article contained some neutral/positive information as well. It might be that the effects of negative publicity are harder to mitigate when other media are being used (e.g., TV news), when media coverage is more widespread, when other topics (e.g., an ethical scandal) are being covered, or when the negative information is more extreme. In addition, in our study, there was a short time interval between publicity and the second information source. Future studies should examine the effects of recruitment advertising and word-of-mouth presented at larger time intervals after negative publicity, and try to establish an optimal time for introducing a “mitigating” positive information source. Second, demand characteristics might have contributed to the observed increases in organizational attractiveness, although several precautions were taken to avoid this. The study’s purpose was described rather vaguely as “examining how people form impressions about organizations and which organizational characteristics are important in this process.” Participants were also instructed to answer honestly, they were reassured that there were no wrong answers, and participation was anonymous. Finally, the occurrence of positive word-of-mouth about the organization after negative publicity could be questioned. However, negative publicity usually provides rather general information that leaves enough room for more specific diagnostic information to influence the perceptions and interpretations of potential applicants. For instance, a company’s restructuring could actually be explained as a positive signal that the company is striving to regain its health. Furthermore, our results indicate that the credibility of positive word-of-mouth was moderately high and that respondents were highly susceptible to it, even though it was provided after negative publicity.

Our findings have a number of theoretical implications suggesting directions for future research. First, the accessibility–diagnosticity model (Feldman & Lynch, 1988; Herr et al., 1991) can be used as a theoretical framework to guide future research on the effects of (multiple) recruitment-related information sources. Future studies should include measures of perceived accessibility and diagnosticity to verify whether they mediate the effects of information sources on organizational attractiveness. A particularly promising avenue for future research consists of integrating various theories to provide a more complete picture of recruitment sources. For example, the media richness theory (Allen et al., 2004) could incorporate accessibility and diagnosticity as factors mediating the effects of media richness. Finally, more research is needed regarding external recruitment sources and multiple source effects, with word-of-mouth promising to be an especially powerful and credible recruitment tool. In fact, future research should investigate how specific dimensions of word-of-mouth, such as valence, tie strength, sender expertise, and medium, can be manipulated to influence its effects on organizational attractiveness. Another intriguing research question would be whether organizations can successfully imitate word-of-mouth (instead of indirectly stimulating it), for instance, through the use of employee testimonials, and how this affects perceptions of credibility and organizational attractiveness.

Finally, several practical implications follow from our study. First, companies that are suffering from negative publicity can make use of recruitment advertising or positive word-of-mouth to soften its damaging effects. Although recruitment advertising is more easily and directly managed, it is more expensive and less credible than word-of-mouth, and its impact might be less thorough.
and enduring. Companies can try to stimulate positive word-of-mouth indirectly, for instance, by developing good relationships with key influencers and opinion leaders and by providing positive internship experiences. Second, companies should proactively try to avoid negative publicity and stimulate positive publicity because of their possible impact on organizational attractiveness. Again, this can be realized through indirect strategies such as press releases and public-service activities. Third, taken together, our results strongly suggest that companies should include external information sources in their recruitment mix because of their credibility and impact on organizational attractiveness. Moreover, the accessibility–diagnosticity model underlines the importance of developing an integrated recruitment communication strategy (Keller, 1998). All the sources conveying organizational information to potential applicants need to be consistent in content and valence, because any “outlier” can be so diagnostic that it interferes with the effects of the other sources and has a major impact on organizational attractiveness.

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References


