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Exploring the link between human resource practices and turnover in multi-brand companies: The role of brand units' images

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ABSTRACT

Using exploratory qualitative research undertaken in a multi-brand fashion company, this article investigates the role that brand units' images play in the link between human resources management (HRM) practices and employee internal and external turnover. Our results suggest that the existence of imbalanced and differently attractive brand units' images might weaken or remove the effectiveness of corporate HRM practices in keeping internal and external turnover rates low. This because employees may be interested in transferring to the most appealing brand(s) or, if not possible to do so, leaving the company. This article contributes to the debate regarding the use of HRM practices in multi-brand companies, especially in industries where both the brand and the product have a highly-symbolic content. Based on our conclusions, we recommend that brand units with less prestigious images compensate for their lower attractiveness with specific brand unit HRM practices to attract and retain their employees. Theoretical and policy implications of the findings are discussed.

1. Introduction

The multi-unit corporation, comprising separate headquarters and relatively autonomous and discrete operating units, also called the M-Form (Chandler, 1962, 1991; Kipping & Westerhuis, 2012; Williamson, 1975, 1981, 1985; Yamin & Forsgren 2006), has grown into one of the dominant organizational forms in industrial settings (Fligstein, 2001; Strikwerda & Stoelhorst, 2009), in both Western nations and emerging economies (Aulakh & Kotabe, 2008; Seo, Lee, & Wang, 2010). In a multi-brand organization, the sub-units are differentiated by brand. When an organization adopts this form, it develops a portfolio strategy for its brand units and fills multiple market positions, adapting the brand portfolio to match the environment and the company's strategic direction, while still maintaining continuity in its profit-generating activities. In multi-brand companies, similar products marketed under different, unrelated brand names might compete; therefore, the firm constantly monitors its brands to avoid cannibalization and encourage synergistic effects among them (Aaker, 2004).

Many scholars have devoted particular attention to multi-unit organizations with sub-units differentiated by geographical area, and several researchers have studied multi-brand organizations from a marketing perspective (Aribarg & Arora, 2008a, 2008b; Giannoulakis & Apostolopoulou, 2011; Schuh, 2007). Yet few explore the complexities that multi-brand organizations confront to manage their personnel (e.g., Simon & Lieberman, 2010), even as the mergers and concentrations in many industries make these multi-brand corporations (MBCs) larger and more complex, with a vast array of new organizational challenges (Demos, 2008; Levenson, 2008). To cope with the complexity related to multi-brand portfolio management and the interrelationships among their employees and brands (Nippa, Pidun, & Rubner, 2011), MBCs increasingly invest in human resource management (HRM) practices.

According to extant research, HRM practices exert positive effects on firm outputs (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, & Kalleberg, 2000; Pernkopf-Konhaeusner & Brandl, 2010), including greater productivity, stronger corporate financial performance, and lower employee turnover (Guest, 2002; Gurbuz & Mert, 2011; Huselid, 1995). The adoption of HRM practices appears particularly crucial for MBCs (Brexendorf & Kernstock, 2007), which face growing competition in their efforts to attract and retain skilled, qualified employees (Hartmann, Feisel, & Schober, 2011; Horwitz, 2011), even among different units within the same corporation (Iles, Chuai, & Preece, 2010). Thus, maximizing the retention capacity offered by HRM practices could give individual units an effective competitive advantage (Garavan, 2012).

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Very little research specifically explores the link between HRM practices and outcomes in the case of a multi-brand group though. A research gap persists regarding the relationship of HRM practices at the corporate and brand unit levels with employee turnover in the MBC. Through an exploratory study, we seek to fill this gap and shed light on potential factors at play in this relationship. We suggest that in MBCs, employee turnover is unique, in that not all brands within the same company are equally attractive in the eyes of employees, as they might have different characteristics and status (Frank, 1985). Therefore, our research objective is to understand the role that the degree of brand units' status difference plays in the relationship between HRM practices and turnover in MBCs. In doing that, we contribute to the previous studies on the link between HRM practices and turnover by disentangling the different dynamics at play at corporate and brand unit level and how they might influence each other in a multi-brand company, a context often neglected in the HR literature.

From a qualitative study of a multi-brand fashion company, we derive a specific interpretation of (internal and external) turnover in multi-brand companies and argue that this phenomenon might relate to the role played by brand units' images. Regardless of corporate level efforts to build engagement through the implementation and enhancement of corporate HRM practices, emerging and significant brand unit differences might remove or weaken the positive effects of corporate HRM practices, because employees may be interested in transferring to the most attractive brand or, if not possible to do so, leaving the company.

In the next section, we discuss the characteristics of multi-brand corporations and the role that human resource management practices and brand images play in such a context. After we describe the research setting and research methods, we outline our findings and interpret them. We conclude by discussing key managerial implications, some limitations of our study and future research avenues.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Units' competition and employee turnover in MBCs

The 1990s witnessed the evolution of the M-form toward a more decentralized structure, with more accountable and autonomous subunits that showed a higher degree of differentiation (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1993). In both the classic and evolved M-forms, subunits compete for resources (Marino & Zábojník, 2004; Williamson, 1985). Compared with other M-forms, multi-brand companies are characterized by an additional and stronger form of competition, beyond that for resources, because the brand units may be located in the same geographical areas and seek to capture the same potential clients and markets (Aribarg & Arora, 2008a, 2008b). Furthermore, subunits compete for employees, in that different brands within the MBC represent a source of attraction for not only customers, but also employees (Brexendorf & Kernstock, 2007).

If the role of brand images has certainly been stressed from a customer perspective (e.g. Taylor, Hunter, & Lindberg, 2007), it also plays a pivotal role in keeping and attracting employees, or the firm's human capital (Wilden, Gudergan, & Lings, 2010). For instance, research has highlighted that positive and distinctive brands influence employees' loyalty, thereby reducing their intention to leave (Punjaisri, Wilson, & Evanschitzky, 2009; Reichheld, 1996). Brands provide employees with instrumental and symbolic value (Ambler & Barrow, 1996), and employees' feeling of pride in working for a company with a strong brand image usually increases their willingness to stay (Jiang & Iles, 2011). Based on a review of preliminary interviews studies in three companies in China, Jiang and Iles (2011) have shown that potential and current employees assess job offers or organizational positions considering their perceptions of organizational attractiveness and brands. Indeed, the brand helps organizations communicate with potential and existing employees, maintain their loyalty, "compete effectively for talent, and enhance employee engagement, recruitment, and retention" (Jiang & Iles, 2011, p. 98). Thus, recruitment-related and internal branding communications are crucial in increasing brands' attractiveness. The importance of employees' perception of the brands can also be seen in the fact that employees are often willing to accept lower salaries if they have the opportunity to work for a high-status brand (Frank, 1985). Also, they tend to categorize their organizations in a way that their brands are interpreted as "different from" and "better than" the rest (Maxwell & Knox, 2009).

The presence of several brands in MBCs makes employee–corporation–business unit relations more critical. For example, competition among units might increase when the brands are not equally attractive to employees, such that employees prefer to work only for the most attractive brands within the company, which increases internal mobility in favor of those brands.

Companies show more control over internal turnover they activate rather than over internal turnover started by employees (Holtom, Mitchell, Lee, & Eberly, 2008; Reiche, 2008); we use "internal turnover" to refer to employees' internal mobility within the organization (Blau & Boal, 1989). Regardless of the source of this initiative though, a desirable level of internal turnover could be beneficial for MBCs (see Madsen, Mosakowski, & Zaheer, 2003), in that it provides employers with the opportunity to renew the talent pool, without destabilizing the status quo. Furthermore, it promotes socialization and knowledge sharing and transfer, as well as the transfer of best practices across brands. Internal transfers can be part of a long-term career plan for employees too. Undesirable internal turnover instead is detrimental for the MBC, requiring human resource managers to find ways to control or stop internal mobility to avoid a diaspora of talent from other brand units toward the most attractive one. Such controls might counter the expectations of employees, causing frustration and poor motivation, and perhaps even leading to voluntary external turnover (Davis-Blake, Broschak, & George, 2003; Feldman & Thomas, 2007). Therefore, in multi-unit organizations a link might exist between internal and external turnover.

Voluntary employee external turnover—that is, when employees leave the employing organization altogether (Gardner, Wright, & Moynihan, 2011)—entails various unfavorable organizational consequences (Huselid, 1995; Reiche, 2008). As reported in Reiche (2008), it prevents people from the building of durable interpersonal relationships and ensuring regular transfer of knowledge (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Lazarova & Tarique, 2005); it also increases recruitment, selection, and training costs, while reducing motivation among the employees left (Mobley, 1982). Similar to internal turnover though, a healthy level of external turnover can have positive implications, such as the exit of employees with poor performance levels, and the facilitation of new perspectives and ideas arriving into the organization (Martone, 2006).

The implementation of HRM practices at corporate and subunit levels in turn might be able to control internal and external turnover, both on a short-term and responsive basis and for a more long-term and preventive nature (Reiche, 2008). In the specific case of MBCs, the link between internal and external turnover still exists, but other elements, such as the attractiveness of the company's brands for employees, might have a strong influence on the way HRM practices influence internal and external turnover.

2.2. Human resources management practices in MBCs

The role of HRM practices for controlling turnover has been well investigated (e.g., Barrick & Zimmerman, 2005; Buller & McEvoy, 2012; Fey, Morgulis-Yakushev, Park, & Bjorkman, 2009; Guest, 2002; Katou & Budhwar, 2010). For instance, investments in compensation and performance assessment systems, employee involvement and training, comprehensive recruitment and selection procedures are associated with lower employee turnover (Huselid, 1995; Tracey & Hinkin, 2008). Moreover, job enrichment interventions and realistic job previews might reduce (Barrick & Zimmerman, 2005; McEvoy & Cascio, 1985; Phillips, 1998). Similarly, perceptions of job security, the presence of a union and organizational tenure are all associated with a reduction in employees quitting (Arnold & Feldman, 1982; Baysinger & Mobley, 1983; Cotton & Tuttle, 1986; Sheridan, 1992).

Some authors attend specifically to HRM practices in M-forms, implemented at both corporate and geographically dispersed business unit levels (e.g., Chung, Bozkurt, & Sparrow, 2012; Myloni, Harzing, & Hafiz, 2007; Sparrow, 2007; Volberda & Lewin, 2003; Wocke, Bendixen, & Rijamampianina, 2007). However, the co-existence of corporate and business unit HRM practices is not always easy to manage. On the one hand, corporate HRM practices (e.g., reward systems tied to organizational goals) aim to mirror the company's strategy and organizational competencies, to support the company's overall competitive advantage. Corporate HRM practices thus help foster cooperative mechanisms, by creating a positive organizational environment (Houston, Walker, Hutt, & Reingen, 2001) and enhancing job satisfaction, which should reduce external turnover (Gardner et al., 2011). On the other hand, business units' HRM practices, embedded in the specific units, support their specific objectives and tend to enhance the competition among them. For example, reward systems that focus on subunit performance may create heterogeneous identities that create conflict and competition (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

For M-forms with subunits differentiated by brand, the brand units likely implement several HRM practices to drive specific employees' behaviors, but the behaviors required at the corporate level might not be the same as those required at the brand units' levels, resulting in tensions and conflicts (Brexendorf & Kernstock, 2007). The discrepancy in required behaviors also likely exists across different units. Additionally, the conflicts that emerge as a consequence of these perceived differences might be reinforced or attenuated by the unique attractiveness of each brand for employees. Employees may perceive that some brands offer better employment opportunities and working conditions than others. Therefore, specific brand unit HRM practices enhance competition among brands, thereby leading to internal mobility attempts and, in the worst case, to external turnover.

A paucity of research details the link between HRM practices and internal and external turnover in multiunit organizations though, despite the notable turnover challenges in these contexts, such as pay differentials between the corporate and business unit levels (Toh & DeNisi, 2003). With these considerations but scant research evidence, we explore corporate and business unit HRM practices, separately and interactively, and their link with internal and external turnover, in the specific case of multi-brand corporations where brand images are differently attractive for their employees.

2.3. Brand units' images in MBCs

Scholars in the past years have given increasing attention to the role that brand images play in organizations (e.g. Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). Differently from organizational identity, which has been defined as the set of beliefs about what is most core, enduring, and distinctive about an organization, or the collective sense of "who we are as an organization" (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Cunha & Orlikowski, 2008; Gioia et al., 2000; Mackey & Whetten, 2002; Smith, Vieira da Cunha, Giangreco, Vasilaki, & Carugati, 2013; Tajfel & Turner, 1985), organizational image offers different conceptualizations that depend on the perspective. From an internal perspective, it pertains to how the organization's members think outsiders regard the organization, or to the employees' perceptions of the perceptions of outsiders (which is why it is sometimes labeled "construed external image"; Dutton et al., 1994). From an external perspective, organizational image involves how outsiders actually perceive the organization, either in the short term ("transient image"; Gioia et al., 2000) or the long term ("reputation"; Fombrun, 1996).

Employees may be proud of being part of an organization with a positive image and they are even more strongly affected by a negative reputation. When an employee perceives the organization's brand as distinctive and prestigiuos, identification will be stronger, and in turn it will lower turnover. (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Mael & Ashforth, 1995). People who identify with their organization integrate it into their self-concepts and become psychologically intertwined with it, which makes them very willing to continue their membership (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994; Reiche, 2008). Stuart (2002, p. 30) argues that: "the more employees identify with the organization [...] the more employees are likely to uphold that identity in their actions". Brand attractiveness, thus, fosters organizational identification, which makes employees adopt organizational citizenship behavior (Dukerich, Golden, & Shortell, 2002; Tyler & Blader, 2000, 2003; Van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, & Christ, 2005), transmit a positive image of the organization to external stakeholders (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), and behave in ways that reflect the organizational identity (Dutton et al., 1994).

Research has shown that in MBCs, organizational members might invoke either higher-order (corporate) or lower-level (brand unit) images (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001). The more salient a higher-order image, the greater the likelihood is that an organizational member will follow organizational goals ahead of narrow, lower-order goals and cooperate with other organizational members across units (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994). When the reference point is the organization as a whole, an employee is more likely "to think, feel, and act in ways consistent with broader organization goals" (Houston et al., 2001, p. 21), which in turn fosters even greater cooperation among organizational members. Organizational members who strongly identify with a particular unit instead tend to engage in patterns of in- and out-group dynamics. Strong identification encourages "increased cooperation with organizational members who are part of the group and increased competition with non-members" (Dutton et al., 1994, p.24). If employees perceive their brand unit's image as more attractive than the corporate one or than that of another brand unit, they are more likely to identify with their brand unit and compete with other subgroups. Indeed, people identify most strongly with groups that are distinctive and prestigious and that compete with salient out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Therefore, employees' perception of another brand unit's image as more attractive than their own brand units likely increases competition and intentions to move to the most attractive brands.

If the role of brand images (and subsequent identification) has been largely investigated in different contexts, and some scholars have highlighted its impact on turnover (i.e. Mael & Ashforth, 1995), research is needed on how this variable might specifically play a role in the relationship between HRM practices at corporate and brand unit levels, and internal and external turnover.

Table 1
ONE's evolution.

	2011	2010
Turnover (millions of euros)	14.000	13.000
Number of stores	5500	5000

3. Research setting and methods

3.1. Research setting

This research is based on an analysis of ONE,[3] a large, multi-brand, fashion group that produces and distributes apparel, footwear and accessories (Table 1). The company comprises eight different brands (Tables 2 and 3). Despite some attempts to differentiate their target markets, the brands compete and often share the same markets and geographical areas. The different brand units all have the same organizational structures, featuring design, manufacturing, distribution, operations, business development, and general management areas.

The firm's origins date to the 1980s, and the number of employees has increased considerably in recent years, by riching more than 100.000 workers. Among the employees, 59% have at least 36 months of experience in the company; in 2012, 80% of the professionals were women, and 20% were men (source: 2012 Annual Report of the company). The designers specialize in a specific brand, such that they are responsible for the collection, concept, design, and development of the products marketed under one brand name.

This case represents an ideal setting for our research for several reasons. First, ONE belongs to the fashion sector, for which the brand images have very high value and significance for both customers and employees. Second, in this multi-brand company, the different brands offer distinctive images and reputations, which reinforce the different power of attraction. Third, in recent years, ONE has experienced increasing turnover and thus invested considerably in HRM practices to control and reduce this turnover.

3.2. Multi-brand fashion companies

Fashion is a very symbolic industry; the symbols associated with different brands represent relevant outcomes and the exclusive focus of the competition. The MBCs in the fashion industry combine a great number of brands, experience, and know-how to support and strengthen the historical brand, which usually lends its name to the entire group (e.g., the Louis Vuitton Moet Chandon Hennessy [LVMH] Group, the Gucci Group). These groups thus benefit from an array of positive synergies. Their economic strength allows them to win symbolic battles, which helps ensure that their profit-generating businesses remain in fashion (Ijaouaneet & Kapferer, 2012; Yi-Zhong, 2009).

For organization and management literature (Djelic & Ainamo, 1999; Richardson, 1996), fashion offers an interesting study topic, because the brands assume incredibly high symbolic value and can be very attractive for both customer and employees (Cappetta & Gioia, 2006), or more generally for all stakeholders (Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009). The importance of the brand and its reputation for fashion companies is well summarized by the CEO of Bulgari, who states that the risk for companies acting improperly is not only losing money, but also jeopardizing reputation (Gumbel & Levenson, 2007). In the fashion industry, what governs all corporate activities is image (Cappetta & Cillo, 2008). Multi-brand fashion groups are aware of differentials in terms of brands' status and images in the groups and in some cases they tend to encourage mobility among their employees from one brand to another, as it is considered "a way to create a learning organization", as reported in the LVMH group web page (2013). However, the different brands very much care about retaining their top performers through bonuses higher than the market average and profit sharing and this might create the existence of differences in terms of HRM practices.

For what concerns the balance and synergies between the corporate and brand unit levels, in MBCs, the corporate level might insist on a creative integration front that indicates creative interchanges across brands, in support of its less innovative brands. It also would reinforce certain trends, such that it might create or confirm a completely new fashion style. The obvious risk is that instead of favoring these brands, a stylistic standardization might hamper them, in terms of the exclusivity they aim to project. As this case shows, MBCs deal with their complex organizational structures and strategies (Levenson, 2008). To reap the benefits and profits of balancing and integrating their management, production, distribution, and creative resources though, they need brand differentiation, such that each brand in the portfolio is distinct and recognizable. The creative image of each brand is part of the reason the MBC would acquire a brand in the first place, so it must be safeguarded and capitalized.

3.3. Data collection

We used multiple sources of information for our exploratory qualitative study, including documents, archival data, annual reports, external communication tools, and, following Yin's (1994) suggestions on data collection, semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The analysis of secondary data sources served as preparation of the interviews, which took place in 2008. Among the documents, we examined internal manuals and reports (2003–2008), along with public information related to HRM practices at the corporate and brand unit levels in longitudinal terms from 2003 until 2012. These documents were useful for revealing the evolution of the human resource management practices, and included descriptions of the procedure to carry out selection processes, documents related to the identity seminars (when identity claims are debated), compensation packages and policies, performance management systems, job descriptions, role profiles, and organizational charts. We also analyzed videos that described the design, manufacturing, and distribution processes. The videos were particularly important for understanding the underlying differences among the brands and their products. We analyzed annual reports from 2003 to 2012, the corporate website, and other documents intended for external communication. Through archival searches, we tracked the evolution of the corporate and business strategy, strategic goals, and links to evolving identity claims.

The analysis of these secondary sources allowed us to draw some initial conclusions about the evolution of human resources practices and the nature and characteristics of the different brands. Specifically, it clearly emerged that the corporate HR department pursued the aim of harmonizing HRM practices throughout the different brands, by centralizing the HR services at corporate level and applying the same HR practices and tools to the employees of all the brands (same performance evaluation scheme, same compensation package, same benefits and so on). Moreover, documents related to the identity seminars showed that the company tried to promote the same values for all the brands (dynamism,

[3] We use fictitious names to protect the firm's privacy.

Table 2
ONE's brands indicators in 2011.

Brands name	Contribution to sales (%)	% of stores	% of country presence
Alpha	64	33	100
Beta	7	13	60
Gamma	7	10	62
Delta	10	15	69
Epsilon	6	12	56
Zeta	2.5	9	38
Eta	3	6	36
Teta	0.5	2	21

creativity, team spirit, social responsibility, quality and youth). In addition, the analysis of the evolution and results of the different brands during the years and the corporate press releases and specialized fashion press reviews showed that Alpha brand in the last years grew remarkably compared to the other brands (Table 4 and 5). Also, fashion critics reviews highlighted that the market in the past 5 years demonstrated a strong appreciation for Alpha, given its fashion component.

According to these preliminary conclusions, we prepared a set of questions for different groups of employees (general managers of the different brands, designers, HR department employees). The questions aimed at understanding the role of the company's and brands' images, evolution of the HRM practices, satisfaction of the employees with the HRM practices, perception of differences among brands and of their attractiveness, employees' willingness to contribute to the corporate versus brand unit levels, and finally possible explanations related to turnover variations. The interview protocols are available from the authors upon request.

To make sure that we could draw conclusions based on significant evidence, we included a broad panel of informants working in different departments at different levels and with different responsibilities, and we also took into considerations views emerging from specialized press. Following Locke (2001), we selected people for the interviews by moving from a purposeful to a theoretical approach. We initially interviewed six people who could provide rich and insightful information on HRM practices: the director of corporate HRM, the recruitment and selection manager, the training manager, the compensation manager, the industrial relations manager, and the internal communications manager. Subsequently, we selected the informants on the basis of our specific research interests. For example, we included designers, who are most sensitive to the differential attractiveness of the various brands, because design is strongly linked to the symbolic value of the brand. To deepen our understanding of the environmental and strategic challenges that the company faced, we interviewed members of the top management team, including different brand managers and the general manager of the company. Thus, the informants included the HR manager and all collaborators working in the department at different levels, all the brand unit managers, the general manager of the company, and 10 designers. Each interview lasted about 90 min. During each visit to the company, we also took observational notes and compared impressions afterward. We interviewed 25 people, for a total of 2250 min (Table 6).

Table 3
Brands' characteristics.

Alpha	Fashionable; dresses for men and women
Beta	Casual wear
Gamma	Elegant and classic dresses
Delta	Casual, young female dresses
Epsilon	Casual and trendy wear
Zeta	Fashion casual dresses and intimate clothing
Eta	Fashion accessories
Teta	Fashion accessories, shoes and dresses

3.4. Data analysis

The interview transcripts served as the primary data for our analysis. The availability of a range of data sources supported evidence triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). For example, we compared top managers' accounts with those of the designers and against the view expressed by the HR department employees and manager. The accounts were largely consistent. We also used NVivo to analyze the transcripts of the interviews, along with our field notes and all the documents that appeared relevant for our research (Hutchison, Johnston, & Breckon, 2010). We started the coding by searching for interrelated indications of positive or negative experience with HRM practices (Eisenhardt, 1989) and their link with turnover. In doing so, we followed Charmaz (2006) three cycles of coding. The first step was to associate emergent codes with interview statements; in our case, we explored the link between HRM practices and turnover at corporate and brand unit levels. We also tried to understand additional elements that might influence the HRM practices–turnover link, by fostering cooperation or competition mechanisms among brands. The second step was to identify theoretical coding and detect relationships among the codes. Finally, the third step consisted of running selective coding to verify that all the data were associated with one of the identified categories, which supported the development of theoretical concepts. We halted the analysis when no new categories emerged from the data. We then checked for reliability by cross-checking our scheme of codes. In Table 7 we summarize an extraction of the codes associated not only with HRM practices, but also with brand images, which emerged as the most relevant elements influencing the dynamics of cooperation and competition. In turn, they appear likely to influence internal and external turnover.

4. Results

4.1. HRM practices and turnover

4.1.1. The corporate level

At ONE, the selection, training, and industrial relations activities have long been driven mainly by administrative approaches. With the arrival of a new HR manager in 2003, the corporate function experienced a phase of transition and change, assuming a more strategic role in the company. The objective of the new manager was to implement new corporate HRM practices that could improve the organizational climate, attract the best talent, increase employees' job satisfaction, and keep turnover rates low.

In 2003, an early initiative at the corporate level involved internationalizing the employee recruitment process, especially for the design area. Previously, only 5% of those employed by ONE had an international background, but as the recruitment and selection manager explained:

> Our designers are really excited by the international environment we have created at ONE. Creative people place a high value on working in an international environment. This makes our organization more attractive.

In the same year, the approach to training changed dramatically too. Prior to that point, training activities mainly filled in for gaps in specific technical competencies, such as store management systems, product training, collection presentations, or custom tailor-

Table 4
Alpha's evolution.

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Alpha/ONE stores (%)	35	32	32	32	37	36	35	34	33
Alpha/ONE sales (%)	70	67	66	65	66	66	64	65	64

Table 5
Number of times the brand's name appeared in specialized fashion press (in ONE's country)

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Alpha	32	61	106	128	91	119	233	168	193
Beta	5	5	18	13	3	19	18	23	32
Gamma	9	10	17	17	6	27	24	23	81
Delta	0	0	3	2	2	2	8	14	27
Epsilon	1	2	10	6	1	8	10	24	27
Zeta	2	2	9	2	1	7	5	16	8
Eta	3	2	8	3	3	13	30	11	14
Teta	0	0	0	0	4	7	10	9	2

Source: Factiva.

ing. The new training initiatives took a broader perspective for all the functions, including managerial and behavioral topics, such as introductory training and new incorporations, team leadership and management, basic competences in foreign languages, and uses of information systems and new technologies. To proffer individual training plans, each new employee was assigned an experienced colleague, an internal tutor, to develop the competencies required for the position.

The organization of the work also shifted, from a more hierarchal to a team-based approach. The design, purchasing, product, and manufacturing units all were grouped under a single department, in charge of international markets. Therefore, people from all these previously separate areas came together and worked in teams focused on different types of products and markets. Then in 2004, ONE developed a new performance assessment system, in which the indicators were the same for all brands, and achieving certain performance targets meant a 20% salary increase. At the same time, the new HR manager introduced a focus on emotional rewards:

> Nowadays employees seem to care also about intangible rewards, beyond the monetary ones. They need to feel that what they do is crucial for a company's growth and survival. ONE's objective is to transmit to the employees the feeling that what they are doing is vital for us.

The homogeneity of performance assessments, with similar panel of goals, along with new HR practices shared across all the brands, aimed at strengthening the employees' sense of identity with the company as a whole (corporate level), not just with the brand. These initiatives included after-work meetings (e.g., monthly "happy hour" organized in a luxury hotel), benefits for mothers (flowers, reserved parking, presents), discounts in city stores, sponsorships of summer language courses abroad, and a minimum of three trips abroad guaranteed to designers. As the Alpha director explained:

> We give our designers the opportunity to travel every year to find inspiration, discover new trends and come up with new ideas. As many designers observe, this opportunity enhances not only their creativity, but also motivation and job satisfaction.

One of the employees working in the design team commented on the corporate HRM practices:

Table 6
Overview of interviewees.

#	Interviewee	Department	Duration (min)
1	Director HRM	Corporate HRM function	120
2	Responsible of the recruitment and selection	Corporate HRM function	90
3	Training manager	Corporate HRM function	60
4	Compensation benefits manager	Corporate HRM function	60
5	Industrial relations manager	Corporate HRM function	50
6	Internal communications manager	Corporate HRM function	80
7	Designer	Alpha	90
8	Designer	Alpha	70
9	Designer	Beta	90
10	Designer	Beta	80
11	Designer	Gamma	100
12	Designer	Delta	90
13	Designer	Epsilon	80
14	Designer	Epsilon	80
15	Designer	Teta	90
16	Designer	Eta	90
17	CEO	Company's top management	90
18	General Manager	Alpha	130
19	General Manager	Beta	90
20	General Manager	Gamma	100
21	General Manager	Delta	95
22	General Manager	Epsilon	100
23	General Manager	Zeta	100
24	General Manager	Eta	105
25	General Manager	Teta	120

> I have been in the company for 8 years now. I really believe HR did a great job in investing in new activities like the training, seminars, and travels, and in developing new initiatives for all the brands without creating any differences or "brands' hierarchies". Many years ago I worked for one of the top brands in the luxury industry, and the company had two lines: haute couture and pret-à-porter. Despite the attempts of HR managers to hide that, we all knew that people working for the pret-à-porter did not have exactly the same treatment in terms of salary and opportunities of the haute-couture line! And this was really demotivating for us.

The internal communication manager explained:

> The HR initiatives increase satisfaction at work. We feel that our needs are well taken into considerations and that we have the opportunity to growth and have a career in the company.

In addition to the more traditional HRM practices at corporate level, ONE's top management aimed at transferring the company's core values and beliefs to all the employees without making any distinction among brands, to build a common identity, with no distinction between the corporate and unit levels. As the HR

Table 7
Examples of codes and categories.

Categories	Level	Codes	Example
HRM Practices	Corporate	Cooperation	"We give all our employees the same opportunities and we treat them the same way. Wages, performance management, training, career, benefits... We have seen that this creates a positive organizational climate and increase the spirit of collaboration towards the achievement of the our goals as a company" (HR manager) "The work environment, the opportunities we have....The company makes us think that we are all for one and one for all. No differences among brands for what concerns our pay or benefits as designers increases my willingness to work with my colleagues, support them and share ideas" (designer Gamma)
		Intention to stay	"One of the reasons I have decided to work here is the team spirit. You can work for Alpha, Beta ... whatever ... you get the same money, the same training, the same evaluation system, the same opportunities.... Being treated well and with fairness is crucial to retain people ... or at least, me!" (designer Alpha) "There is no hierarchy of treatment of the employees here! In the previous company where I was working my colleagues doing exactly the same job I was doing (but for another brand) were paid more than me.... I never understood the reason. This is why I left.... At the end of the day, we were the same company! Here it's different, I like it. I work for Gamma, but if I'd work for Beta I wouldn't get more money or better training..." (designer Gamma) If you ask me to describe ONE, Alpha, Beta and the other brands, I would probably come up with the same adjectives, despite the differences among brands. In all our brands, we know we are part of a large family and we have the same DNA. This is why we all have the same purposes at work and we help each other all the time" (designer Teta) I work for ONE first, and then for Alpha. I am part of a large young and dynamic group of people, and I feel that we are all very integrated with ONE's spirit and we work all together for a common goal" (designer Alpha)
	Brand Unit	Competition	"Once we had the opportunity to send three employees to an important fashion event. I decided to send three employees from Alpha…. People from other brands got really upset.... The mood among employees changed, I noticed that immediately.... I will not repeat this mistake a second time!" (HR manager).

(continued on next page)

Table 7 (*continued*)

		Internal and external turnover	"During the selection process candidates want to understand the differences in terms of opportunities among brands. When they start working for the company, they immediately make comparisons among brands to be sure they get the same of their colleagues.... If they discover differences, they don't like that at all ... and they start to ask a lot of questions and to be very competitive" (training manager) "Every brand has its spirit and you can better fit a brand or another.... But if the company would pay more designers of Alpha, I'm sorry to say that, I would go to work for Alpha! At the end of the day, we are all doing the same job here" (designer Delta) "Why should I stay in Epsilon if I could do the same job, within the same company, in the same location, even on the same floor—but getting more money or better growth opportunities in Beta?" (designer Epsilon) "I don't think I would like to work for a company which does not treat everybody the same ... just because they work for different labels" (designer Alpha)
Image	Brand Unit	Competition	"Our customers have the perception of differences among the brands ... I think they have a ranking of our brands in their mind.... I don't like to be considered as someone working for the bad quality product.... This puts pressure on me.... I want to demonstrate to my colleagues of other brands that we are not inferior" (designer Beta) "I don't like to be considered by my peers and customers as the designer of a lower brand, just because all these articles are coming up in the press about Alpha.... Do they think that I am not good enough to design for Alpha?" (designer Gamma) "We have to work to promote our reputation and avoid to be perceived as the low class brand just because our target are not the most fashionable and rich customers.... My team is very sensitive to that, I don't want to lose my best people because they feel Alpha or Gamma are better" (Epsilon director)

manager explained, activities at all levels of the company worked to support a uniform, internally coherent organizational identity, because:

> When organizational members have a common identity they are more likely to cooperate and contribute to the company's goals.

The general manager reinforced this view, by observing:

> It is very important that all our activities and communications across brand units express the same organizational identity. Indeed, a company can have only one identity. If the brands have different identities, this might create hostility among employees.

In the past, the main difficulty related to the creation of a strong common identity was that Alpha had a long history and its identity was at the basis for the development of ONE's overall identity. Therefore, the differences between Alpha's and ONE's identity were often unclear, which created some tensions within the group. Furthermore, Alpha's identity was so strong that it influenced and shaped the identity of other brands within the group, leaving little room for the differentiation and creating a sense of a distinction between "major" and "minor" brands within the company. The general manager thus noted:

> We were aware of this problem, and this is why we insisted a lot in the past 7 years on the creation of a unique identity for all the brands.

Furthermore, the internal communication manager explained:

> ONE has built a strong positive corporate identity, convincing people to contribute to the corporate level rather than just to a specific brand because they find its identity more appealing.

The creation of identity sub-groups represented a risk that ONE's managers recognized and worked to avoid. When employees from different brand units explained what made ONE and its brands distinctive, the answers were almost always the same: creativity, responsibility, flexibility, team spirit, and youth. As one of the designers remarked:

> We really believe that in this sense top management did a good job. ONE's characteristics are very clear. The identities of the Alpha, Beta, and all the other brands are simply the mirror of ONE.

A Delta designer agreed:

> We really are a young, creative and flexible organization, at all levels and in all brands. We all know who we are as a team and as a group.

Identity was constantly monitored through seminars, designed to harmonize beliefs and values:

> Results from the identity seminars are always very positive. After a very few months our employees understand very clearly who we are as an organization. The seminars for us are a means through which we verify the match between ONE and each employee, and the identification of the employee with our core values. When there is this match, we know that everyone is happy and is more likely to collaborate to the achievement of the organizational goals (HR manager).

4.1.2. The brand unit level

At the brand unit level, the HRM initiatives focused on individual brands. ONE mainly invested in corporate practices to guarantee the same opportunities to all employees, therefore at the brand unit level, very few specific practices existed, aimed at maximizing the fit between the candidates and the brands. For example, starting from 2004, more focus was placed on certain aspects of the recruiting and selection processes.

> Because of the many competitors we have in this area, now more than ever, we have to pay close attention to the brand images we project to our candidates during the selection process. Our mission is to attract and keep the best talent. In order to prevent mistakes in the selection process, we always try to assess whether the candidate fits the brand rather than just assessing the job qualifications. For example, designers who are aware of fashion trends are best suited to working at Alpha, while designers who have a particular bent for an elegant, cosmopolitan style are more suitable for Gamma (recruitment and selection manager).

The person responsible for selecting candidates regularly makes presentations in business and design schools, giving interested students a chance to attend a brief interview and submit their CV to the human resources department. The process continues with a visit to ONE's facilities, where candidates learn about the company and its specific brands. If a candidate's profile meets a particular brand unit's needs, he or she can join new promotion projects, created in 2004. Designers in this project are usually very young, with no previous experience in design but with great potential. The six-month training period, organized specifically for them, has been quite successful and proved to be an extremely effective way of attracting talent.

Among other brand-specific HR initiatives, some of the training programs target the particular needs of the brands. All these corporate and brand HR initiatives continue to be in use at ONE. Since they were adopted, no specific changes have been made.

4.1.3. Evolution of the external and internal turnover rates

As the company expected, its investments in corporate HRM practices created a more positive and cooperative work environment, increased job satisfaction, and reduced external turnover. For example, prior to 2003 and the new policies, annual turnover averaged around 15%, whereas since 2003, the external turnover rate has consistently amounted to 7%. This result can be considered even more positive if compared to the average of staff turnover in the fashion industry, which tend to be much higher compared to other industries where the average turnover is about 13% (Hay Group study 2012; Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development study – CIPD, 2010), and if compared to the average fashion industry turnover rates in ONE's country which ranged from 22% to 40% in the years between 2003 and 2008 (as reported by the National Retail Statistics by industry and region and the 2008 National Study of Changing Workforce). The reasons for turnover in the past usually included burnout, personal reasons or personal adaptation. As the person responsible for training and development explained:

> The reasons our employees have indicated for leaving were usually related to the fact that they did not fit in with our philosophy, as they felt pressed to do more than they could handle. Others, mainly the designers, sometimes prefer to do freelance work, while others move back to their own cities or countries for family reasons. However, the situation in the past years has always been under control, with a stable external turnover of 6–7% and a very low percentage of internal turnover, with no significant differences among brands.

Another predicted result of the investment in corporate HR practices was to reduce internal turnover. According to the HR manager:

> We treat all our employees in the same way. Training and development opportunities, career path, benefits, wage... there are no significant differences among brands... Our objective is to create a positive organizational climate and enhance trust and job satisfaction. Creating specific brand unit HR practices may have reinforced competition among units and increased employees' requests for mobility among brands.

This result seems to have been achieved. The brand units' HRM practices were minimal and of light impact, so the brand units did not compete, and internal turnover rates were low. Between 2003, when the new HR manager arrived, and 2006, the internal turnover rate was 2%.

Despite this positive trend and increased employee job satisfaction, as registered in working climate surveys in 2004 and 2005, both internal and external turnover rates began to increase considerably in 2006. Unexpectedly, external turnover reached 38% in 2008, affecting especially the designers (except Alpha). Although no significant changes had occurred (i.e., no changes in company management, the same compensation policies among brands, and the same development opportunities), something had changed. In particular, before leaving, several designers noted that they would have stayed with ONE if they could work for the Alpha brand.

4.2. The role of brand unit images in fostering competition

Image-related initiatives at ONE aimed to keep its brands distinctive and recognizable. As ONE's general manager explained:

> ONE's name is not popular at all, as the company is marketed through its brands. Very few customers are aware of the existence of ONE as a brand. Consequently, the different brand unit images strongly emerge.

The brand unit images at ONE always remained strictly connected to the brand reputations (i.e., how outsiders actually perceive the organization) and can be better understood through several indicators, such as their contributions to ONE's overall sales, the number of stores for each brand, and the number of countries in which the brand units operated (Table 2). Moreover, the distinctive characteristics of each brand, as diffused through ONE's webpage, reveal several image-related elements (Table 3). What emerges from an observation of these data is that some brands are more fashionable and attractive than others: Alpha is the most popular brand in terms of its contribution to ONE sale, the number of stores, and number of countries in which it operates.

This phenomenon starts to be even more evident from 2006, when the National Monitor of Corporate Reputation showed that whereas the Alpha brand enjoyed a very positive reputation around the world, the other brands did not even appear in the global rankings. The ranking of 2006 clearly stressed that "Alpha succeeded to take over its main competitor's role as the biggest fashion retailer" and was "driving the results of ONE's group". Starting from that year, additional rankings (for instance, the ranking of the Best Corporate Reputations in the World by the Global Ranking Reputation Institute) included Alpha in their top 100 companies with the best reputation. Furthermore, starting from 2006, Alpha's sales and stores increased notably compared to the other ONE brands by marking a significant shift in the brand images of the brands in ONE. We report in Table 4 the number of stores Alpha opened from 2003 until 2012 compared to the other ONE brands, as well as Alpha's contribution to ONE sale. We also report in Table 5 the number of times the different brands of ONE appeared in specialized press from 2004 until 2012. The numbers supports the increased popularity of Alpha compared to the other brands. In addition to that, specialized fashion magazines' articles started presenting Alpha as the brand which "will create the future of the fashion industry", the "best clothing brand for quality and prices", the brand "inspiring the latest fashion trends". The general manager explains:

> In recent years Alpha's reputation has increased. For example, international rankings have highlighted that only the Alpha brand is perceived as very positive and attractive by customers. Some customers are not even aware of the existence of some of the other brands we have in ONE! As a consequence, our employees have started perceiving Alpha as much more attractive than the other brands. This is why everyone now would like to work for Alpha. And we certainly cannot center the entire company on just one brand! This explains why many people are leaving. Although we are trying to communicate to everyone in the company the same identity at all levels and in every brand unit to avoid competition, the fact that different brand unit images are emerging is making things more difficult for us.

Even as ONE's various brand images increasingly grow in terms of international expansion and become prestigious and distinctive, Alpha's image continues to attract particular attention. As the Alpha director stated:

> The success of Alpha has consistently increased in the past five years. The main success factor is represented by its fashion component. We have a transversal clientele which values our products whatever their lifestyle, social class, culture, purchasing power, age, sex, or geographical origin.

In its media report of 2006, it is noted: "Alpha is the second company with the best reputation in its country. Alpha has always made the top 10, and is the second company that has had the best reputation for the last three years".

The general manager explained:

> The discrepancy between the popularity of Alpha and the other brands became so visible at that point that it started modifying the previous balance and enhancing competition among employees. We tried to control the tensions, but we could do it only up to a certain point. The employees started behaving like if there was an hierarchy of the brands within the company, they started making jokes about the existence of first-class and second-class employees depending on the brands they belong to, they asked me for the first time the plans we had for improving brands visibility and image… and honestly in some cases I did not know what to say…

This perception of Alpha's image as more attractive than those of the other brand units was particularly strong in the design area. Designers put value on the image projected and are very sensitive to image-related issues. Thus, one of the designers remarked:

> It was like if suddenly we realized that we had good brands and bad brands within the company. If you are a designer, you really depend on what you do. The identification with what you design is very strong and you want to be appreciated for what you do… The styles among our brands at ONE are not different at the point of requiring very different skills. If you design for Beta or Epsilon you can easily design also for Alpha, you only have to follow the most recent fashion trends. So, why should someone work for the brands with a weak reputation if within the same company you could probably be moved to the most popular brand? The HR team already knows who we are and has selected us for our talent… It is not like changing company, which means starting sending your CV and restarting from zero… The designers should be honest… The dream of all of us is to work for Alpha.

Another designer of Beta added on that:

> I have been working for ONE for many years. If in the past there was a balance among brands, now the situation has changed dramatically; designers feel frustrated if they work for less popular brands, you realize that clearly when there are job openings in the design area of Alpha and then you realize how many of us seek to apply…

The HR manager concurred:

> The consequences of the emergence of the Alpha brand are clear if we consider that in 2006 many designers began asking to change brand unit and move to Alpha. Since conditions in all the units had remained the same (i.e. compensation, career and development policies, management team, team-based structure) and given the conversations we had with those employees who were seeking to move to Alpha, we realized that brand image turned out to be the most relevant factor that made the previous balance completely change.

Since 2006, many designers working for brands with weaker images thus began to feel frustrated and therefore attempted to move to a different brand unit. If internal turnover was not possible, most of the designers preferred to leave the company.

One of the designers of Alpha explains:

> I have been moved in Alpha in 2008. Before I was working for Epsilon, but honestly working for Alpha gives me a very different reputation. Since I started working in Alpha, I have been called many times by head-hunters, and this never happened to me before.

One of the designers of Gamma explains:

> I do not like when I meet people and they ask me "For what brand do you design" and I see from their expressions that they do not know what am I talking about… I have been promised that as soon as there will be a position in Alpha they will

> consider seriously my application, I am tired of being a ''low-level'' employee. If they will not shift me to Alpha, I will start work as a freelance.

Additional quotes in support of all these statements can be found in Table 7.

To avoid a diaspora of creative talent, the HRM function is thinking about introducing new initiatives at brand unit level.

> To create a new balance in the company, we are thinking about promoting a brand rotation program for designers and creating new incentives systems in the different brands. However, we are afraid of the consequences of these initiatives (HRM manager).

5. Discussion

Several considerations and implications emerge from the present research. First of all, our findings show that ONE strongly invested in corporate HRM practices with the objective of creating a positive work environment, weakening perceptions of differences among brands (and thus reducing internal turnover), and increasing job satisfaction (and thus reducing external turnover). It also promoted cooperation among employees through its corporate identity by convincing them that all the brands shared the same attributes and that the company did not have a preferred brand. Indeed, all the employees we interviewed accordingly used the same positive attributes to describe the company's identity, agreed that lower-level identities did not exist and were satisfied with the HRM practices implemented.

However, employee turnover does not only depend on the effective implementation of HRM initiatives at corporate level, as differently attractive brand units might play a role in influencing the link between HRM practices and turnover. Indeed, when brand unit images start to emerge for the first time in 2006 in parallel to the major boom of Alpha, they seem to become a source of disruption of the corporate level initiatives (including the existence of a common identity), and to generate an increase in competition among the different brands. In that year, the brand image of Alpha took over and emerged, and Alpha started to be considered the as the brand having the best image and reputation in the group and even in the country, as shown by data from interviews, specialized press and data related to sales, opening of stores and international expansion. The strength of Alpha's image compared with the images of the other brands prompted competition among the brands and changed the previous balance created by the corporate HRM initiatives. Thus, it might be argued that the consequence of the strength of Alpha's image compared to the one of the other brands was the weakening and removal of the positive effect that corporate HRM practices had in keeping low internal and, because it was impossible to move all the designers to Alpha, external turnover rates.

Therefore, considering our results, we suggest that in the context of multi-brand companies, where corporate and brand unit HRM practices may co-exist, their effects on internal and external turnover could vary, depending on the role played by brand unit images. In ONE, if on the one hand the HRM practices and the existence of a positive identity at the higher-order (corporate) level fostered cooperative mechanisms, on the other the variously attractive images at the lower (brand unit) level enhanced competitive mechanisms and reduced the effectiveness of the HRM initiatives implemented at corporate level. In other words, the emergence of the perception of differences among brand units' images seems to be stronger than the existence of corporate HRM practices, thereby producing their weakening or even failure.

We suggest further research on this topic and accordingly propose three areas that HRM scholars should empirically investigate to elucidate the relationship of HRM practices with internal and external turnover in MBCs. The first area relates to the empirical test of the moderating effect of brand unit images in the link between HRM practices and turnover, as our results propose that the existence of differences among brand unit images might weaken the effect of corporate HRM practices in reducing internal and external turnover. The second area refers to the link between internal and external turnover in MBCs. Results of our investigation have suggested that external turnover rates can be understood in the framework of internal mobility attempts (related to brand units' different status) that could not be satisfied by the HRM function. Internal turnover is sustainable up to a certain extent, after which internal mobility must be stopped to avoid destabilizing the company and external turnover. Future research in other settings might help better clarify this link. The third area has to do with the implications of the existence of strong brand unit images (and the subsequent negative implications for the internal organizational balance) for the corporate and brand unit HRM activities. As also highlighted by ONE's HR manager, companies should compensate for the lower status of certain brands with the promotion of specific HRM practices at brand unit level, by using tangible and/or intangible sources of attraction and retention for employees. However, this might create additional competition among brands and an additional disruption of the internal equilibrium, with the risk of ''losing'' the weaker brands. Additional studies in the context of MBCs should better enlighten both these dynamics and the implications of centralization versus decentralization of HRM practices for the company and the different brands.

6. Conclusions

This study has explored the relationship between corporate and brand unit HRM practices and employee turnover in a multi-brand company operating in the fashion industry, where the brands have a high symbolic value. Our findings suggest that in MBCs, employee turnover might depend on whether the brands are equally attractive in the eyes of employees. In an exploratory case study, we find that the presence of strong and distinctive brand units' images might have a specific role in weakening or even removing the effects that corporate HRM practices have on employee internal and external turnover.

The contribution of this research is relevant for both researchers and practitioners. First, by offering new insights into the under-investigated M-form with subunits differentiated by brand, this study contributes to the literature on multi-unit organizations. Second, by presenting the case of a company that implements HRM practices at the corporate and brand-unit levels, it offers new evidence about how they might affect cooperation and competition dynamics among employees and their turnover. Third, it clarifies the role of brand units' images in influencing the link between HRM and turnover, thus providing managers with important information about the types of leverages they can use to foster cooperation or competition in multi-brand organizations.

The results also suggest that practitioners in MBCs, managing multi-brand portfolios, should consider the complex issues associated with the way employees perceive the attractiveness of different brands. Even if the MBC achieves strategic coherence and develops brands that target different customer populations, not all brands require the same amount and quality of invested resources to attract good employees. If employees perceive differences among brands and retain, they will likely prefer to work for the most appealing one. In this sense, MBCs should work to develop HRM practices at brand unit level that would re-balance and compensate the different brands' status, by using tangible and/or intangible sources of attraction and retention for employees. However, the picture is more complex than it might seem. In fact, even by activating for example higher salaries (tangible element) or initiatives to improve organizational climate (intangible elements) in lower-brand image units, managers of MBCs should always acknowledge that some image-related aspects might not be necessarily fully controlled, namely, how the brands are perceived by customers and how such perception might be then projected on the one of employees.

While our study is focused on the fashion industry, our conclusions might be extendible to other industries, especially the ones where the brands have a high symbolic value (i.e. luxury goods industries) or more in general to all those industries in which the symbolic value of the product plays an important role in determining customers' and employees' preferences. For instance, similar issues to the ones observed in ONE might be present in the food industry: when companies have different restaurant chains with different brands, although HR corporate policies might benefit from a certain level of harmonization, the different positioning of their brands in the perception of customers might make chefs try to work for the most appreciated chain and in case it is not possible, leave the company.

This study suffers from some limitations that suggest some additional research directions. As a case study, there are limitations associated with generalizability (Yin, 1994). More empirical research on these topics could shed more light on the relationship among HRM, employee turnover, and image issues in other high symbolic contexts. Such studies might use other research methods, including participant observation, to identify distinct phenomena at micro-levels and detect their links with macro-level dimensions. A dual analysis perspective appears particularly crucial in complex organizational contexts, such as a fashion MBC setting.

Despite these limitations, the relation between corporate HRM practices and turnover that we documented, and the role that brand images play in this relationship, might be issues of general interest for organizational scholars and practitioners across a variety of disciplines and settings.

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