

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

European Management Journal

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/emj

When reputation management is people management: Implications for employee voice

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 August 2018

Received in revised form

5 August 2019

Accepted 27 August 2019

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Internal reputation management

HRM

Employee branding

Internal branding

People management

Employee voice

ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between internal reputation management, HRM, and employee voice. Drawing on qualitative data from 25 medium-size and large Norwegian organizations, we find that organizations pursue a desired reputation through a single, official corporate voice by discouraging prohibitive employee voice through technocratic control and coercive HRM practices. The emphasis on technocratic control and coercive HRM occurs despite the widely held belief in reputation and branding literatures that employees should be committed corporate ambassadors who enthusiastically promote their organization's desired reputation and deeply believe in the images they convey to internal and external stakeholders. The findings contribute to studies on reputation management by linking internal reputation management, HRM, and employee voice, pointing out "people management" aspects of reputation management and highlighting important organizational and employee-based consequences.

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1. Introduction

Much of the current knowledge on reputation management concerns the strategic design of communication. Scholars have pointed to the need to present consistent, unique, and attractive images of organizations in order to generate the desired impressions in the minds of external constituencies (van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). A growing number of contributions have also addressed the internal aspects of reputation management, arguing that employees have an important role in delivering and "living" the organization's brand (Ind, 2001). Not only is reputation built from "the inside-out" (Ind & Bjerke, 2007; Martin & Hetrick, 2006; Sartain, 2005), it also ideally involves instilling reputation-supporting behaviour in employees by transforming them into "corporate ambassadors" (Alsop, 2004; Dreher, 2014) or "brand champions" (Ind, 2004; Morhart, Herzog, & Tomczak, 2009). Reputation management in the modern "reputation economy" (Hearn, 2010, p. 10), then, is not just about the external handling of reputation through the strategic design of official corporate communication, it also involves an important internal dimension whereby employees' communication is strategically managed.

Scholars have paid scant empirical attention to the "people management" dimension of reputation management as it relates to employees' communication about their organization. Our understanding of how human resource management (HRM) aligns employees' communication with the desired reputation remains underdeveloped, and it is particularly unclear how HRM serves to regulate employees' urge to sometimes speak about their organization in negative ways internally and externally. Employees' prohibitive voice – i.e. "expressions of individuals' concern about existing or impending practices, incidents, or behaviors" (Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012, p. 72) – represents a significant risk for reputation-sensitive organizations because of its potentially negative effects on reputation (Opitz, Chaudhri, & Wang, 2018). HRM can be expected to play an important role in reducing this risk. Our guiding question for this research, therefore, is: *What is the role of HRM in reputation management, and what are the implications of reputation-oriented HRM for employee voice?*

By addressing the management of employees' communication about their organization (their "voice") under strong managerial concern for reputation, this paper builds on and joins a broader debate on the organizational and employee-based consequences of internal reputation management and branding (Edwards, 2005; Harquail, 2007; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Müller, 2017, 2018; Mumby, 2016). We respond to recent calls by Mumby (2016) and Müller (2017) for more critical research into these issues by adding

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2019.08.010>

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insights into the role of HRM in reputation management and its implications for employee voice. Employee voice has been defined as “the discretionary or formal expression of ideas, opinions, suggestions, or alternative approaches directed to a specific target inside or outside of the organization with the intent to change an objectionable state of affairs and to improve the current functioning of the organization, group, or individual” (Bashshur & Oc, 2015, p. 1531). Because reputation management regulates voice, and HRM is “the management of work and people towards desired ends” (Boxall, Purcell, & Wright, 2007, p. 1), the combination of the two is a potentially powerful way of exercising voice control in organizations, socio-ideologically as well as technocratically (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008).

Our findings contribute to internal organizational reputation and internal branding research in several ways. First, at the most basic level, we illustrate the significance of reputation management for contemporary organizations by showing how reputation acts as a strong internal organizing principle guiding strategies, practices, and control systems. Second, by identifying coercive reputation-centred HRM practices restricting prohibitive employee voice, we advance understanding of the “people management” aspects of reputation management and the perceived influence of such systems on employees. These aspects are important because the way in which organizations approach the regulation of employee voice through HRM practices could significantly shape employees' willingness to engage in reputation-building behaviour and ultimately act as “corporate ambassadors”. Thus, knowledge about how HRM influences employees' reputation-building behaviour and communication is crucial for our understanding of the conditions under which employees become brand ambassadors rather than brand saboteurs.

We make these contributions, first, by outlining the theoretical background for the study, second, describing the methodological approaches we followed in carrying out the research, and third, presenting the empirical findings. We close our study by discussing the contributions of our study to literatures on internal reputation management and discussing some directions for future research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. A traditional view on reputation management

Most definitions of corporate reputation management emphasize the role of organizational leaders and spokespersons in influencing the perceptions of an organization held by external stakeholders (Berens, 2016, p. 403; Elsbach, 2012, p. 466). The focus tends to be on verbal communication as a means to shape, maintain, and repair perceptions of organizations' activities and character. Because “reputation only concerns external stakeholders ... without the direct inclusion of employees” (Schultz, Hatch, & Adams, 2012, p. 426), the activities, experiences, and resistance of ordinary employees have traditionally not been addressed in reputation management studies.

According to a traditional way of understanding reputation management, an important goal for reputation-sensitive organizations is to speak with “one single voice” (Argenti & Forman, 2002) or at least achieve a strong level of internal “orchestration” (van Riel & Fombrun, 2007) or integration of communication activities under the same corporate umbrella (Kitchen & Schultz, 2001). Multiple, inconsistent voices are regarded as a problem to be addressed by controlling employees and standardising internal and external communication. Because employees may act against the interest of their organization as brand saboteurs (Ind, 2001; Wallace & de Chernatony, 2007, 2008), the logical response is to

introduce some degree of censorship and perhaps even appoint a “communications czar” controlling all external communication (Schultz & Kitchen, 2004). When internal reputation management is carried out this way in practice, the role of employees has little to do with corporate ambassadorship; rather, it is reduced to not saying anything at all to anyone, anywhere, and at any time that might negatively impact reputation.

From this line of reasoning, giving voice to employees represents a risk because it is difficult to predict what employees might say. Prohibitive voice is a particular problem because it involves expressing concerns that could portray the organization in a negative light. From top management's perspective, it is in the organization's best interest to impose control-based systems to such an extent that prohibitive communication is suppressed or avoided and never finds its way to newspapers, radio, TV stations, or online social media. But even with such systems in place, top management can seldom feel absolutely certain that employees will not do or say something that jeopardises the organization's desired reputation. This fear may trigger even stricter and more rigid regimes of control restricting employees' opportunities to speak up.

2.2. Employees' voice in contemporary reputation management

Recently, studies have taken an increasing interest in how employees' voice and behaviour influence organizational reputation. Building on the notion that employee voice can and should be regulated in a way that promotes the organization's desired reputation, these studies address the contribution of employees in building, confirming, and protecting an organization's reputation or brand every time they describe their organization on social media or online review sites (Dreher, 2014; Könsgen, Schaarschmidt, Ivens, & Munzel, 2018; Rokka, Karlsson, & Tienari, 2014; Schaarschmidt & Walsh, 2018; Walsh, Schaarschmidt, & von Kortzfleisch, 2016) or come into contact with external stakeholders in their day-to-day activities (Cravens & Oliver, 2006; Davies, Chun, Roper, & Silva, 2003; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001; Helm, 2011; Martin & Hetrick, 2006). Instead of preventing employees from communicating, these literatures typically want to include employees in reputation-building communication, many of them recommending that employees serve as “corporate ambassadors” (Alsop, 2004) or “brand champions” (Ind, 2004) in their interaction with external stakeholders. Accordingly, various initiatives referred to as internal branding (Bergstrom, Blumenthal, & Crothers, 2002; King & Grace, 2008), employee branding (Edwards, 2005; Miles & Mangold, 2004, 2007), and internal reputation management (Helm, 2011; Men, 2014) aim to align employees' communication and behaviour with the organization's desired reputation, ultimately instilling “brand citizenship behaviour” (Burmahn, Zeplin, & Riley, 2009) or “reputation-related social media competence” (Walsh et al., 2016) in employees.¹

These initiatives tend to be treated as largely similar processes. Aurand, Gorchels, and Bishop (2005, p. 164) define internal branding and employee branding as efforts that “establish systems/processes and consequent employee behaviours that are consistent with the external branding efforts”. Helm, Liehrs-Gobbers, and Storck (2011, p. 658) define internal reputation management as “all activities or behaviours employees exhibit in order to contribute to the formation of corporate reputation”. In both these literatures, a basic premise is typically that reputation- and brand-enhancing employee communication works best if the employees “deeply

¹ Other related concepts include behavioural branding (Henkel et al., 2007; Kaufmann, Loureiro, & Manarioti, 2016; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015) and internal marketing (Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003; Varey & Lewis, 1999).

believe” in the images they transmit to customers (Vallaster & Chernatony, 2010, p. 184). Internal reputation management, therefore, involves persuading employees about the value of what they are doing by selling the organization's vision, values, and desired reputation to employees so that they, in turn, may do the same to customers as committed and dedicated corporate ambassadors (Miles & Mangold, 2004; Mitchell, 2002).

Scholars are fairly optimistic with respect to the prospect of achieving such a level of dedication from employees. Although critical researchers have raised important concerns about employees becoming artefacts of a brand (Harquail, 2006) or branded robots (Edwards, 2005; Müller, 2017, 2018; Mumby, 2016), proponents argue enthusiastically that such strategic processes may “enchant employees”, give “deeper meaning” to employees' work (Sartain, 2005, p. 90), and lead to “reduced turnover, increased employee satisfaction and performance, enhanced service quality, and a higher level of customer retention” (Miles & Mangold, 2004, p. 70). Successful reputation management through the transformation of employees into ambassadors, therefore, removes the need for strict control of employee voice because dedicated ambassadors who “deeply believe” in the images they communicate are less likely to voice negative concerns about their own organization.

Existing literatures on employee voice in reputation management have added valuable knowledge but also opened up new research avenues. Whereas previous empirical studies have examined the role of internal policies, procedures, and competence assessments in controlling voice (Rokka et al., 2014; Walsh et al., 2016), few have explicitly linked these observations with human resource management practices and examined their implications for employee voice. Table 1 reviews a sample of studies on internal reputation management and internal branding, showing that none of them consider HRM practices and employee voice at the same time. As columns 2 and 3 indicate, existing studies have either examined the relationship between internal reputation management and HRM, or between internal reputation management and employee voice. This limitation highlights the need for a more dedicated combined empirical focus on the dynamics of HRM, internal reputation management, and employee voice. Moreover, empirical research on reputation management addressing voice tends to restrict its focus to employee expressions in social media. How employees articulate concerns about their organizations

internally and in other external arenas than social media, and how their voice is regulated through HRM measures, are thus far largely unexplored questions in reputation management studies.

2.3. Reputation management and HRM

Organizational control systems can be technocratic or socio-ideological, or a combination of both (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004). Technocratic systems concern the visible dimensions of employee activities and the technical rewarding and punishing of communication and behaviour, regulated through direct supervision and formal guidelines, policies, and directives. Socio-ideological control is subtler, occurring through values, ideologies, priorities, and philosophies, directed at employees' experiences, understandings, and beliefs.

Reputation-centred HRM systems emphasizing a high degree of technocratic control involve efforts to instruct and direct employees into behaving in accordance with the organization's desired reputation. Such control is aided by incentives, performance reviews, policies, and sanctions so that employees who do not “believe” in the organization's mission or desired reputation will still display reputation-supporting behaviour. The more emphasis is placed on attempts to coerce employees' effort and compliance (Adler & Borys, 1996), the more these practices can be classified as low commitment, control-based, or coercive HRM (Legge, 2005; Storey, 1989; Truss, Gratton, Hope-Hailey, McGovern, & Stiles, 1997; Watson, 2004). This view is consistent with the traditional view on reputation management outlined above.

HRM systems integrating socio-ideological control aim to create a high-commitment culture by recruiting employees who “believe” in the organization's desired reputation or making existing employees believe, so that an emotional bond with the organization is formed (Kunda, 1992). Such systems seek compliance with the desired reputation through, for example, training programs encouraging specific ways of thinking, but could also target employees' conscience (Costas & Kärreman, 2013). A goal is to make empowered employees exert self-control and self-direction. This approach is consistent with enabling or high commitment HRM (Kuvaas, Dysvik, & Buch, 2014; Legge, 2005; Storey, 1989; Truss et al., 1997), although for employees, socio-ideological control might be just as difficult to relate to as technocratic control, if not more (Kunda, 1992).

Table 1

Summary of reviewed empirical internal reputation management and internal branding research^a.

Authors and year	HRM	Employee voice	Data	Findings or key arguments relating to HRM and/or employee voice
Aurand et al. (2005)	X		201 survey participants	Employees are more positive to the brand and more likely to display brand citizenship behaviour when HR department is involved.
Burmann et al. (2009)	x		18 interviews, 1372 survey participants	Brand-centred HRM is positively related to brand commitment.
Chiang et al. (2012)	X		1588 survey participants	Brand-centred HRM is positively related to brand psychological ownership and brand citizenship behaviours.
Gotsi and Wilson (2001)	X		Semi-structured interviews with directors from seven consulting firms	HR practices should be aligned with brand values in order to promote brand ambassadorship.
Punjaisri and Wilson (2007)	x		50 in-depth interviews, 699 survey participants	Training positively influences employees' brand attitudes.
Rokka et al. (2014)	x		25 interviews with 19 managers in three companies	Reputation management in the context of social media involves a series of balancing acts (e.g. employee participation versus restriction).
Schaarschmidt and Walsh (2018)	x		321 and 255 participants in two surveys	Moderate levels of social media advocacy increases the effect of employees' awareness of impact on reputation on community norm adherence
Walsh et al. (2016)	X		30 in-depth interviews, 4 surveys with 360, 314, 168, and 72 participants respectively	Develops and validates a scale for measuring employees' reputation-related social media competence.

^a Notes: “X” denotes strong focus, “x” denotes that the focus is present. Articles are selected based on searches in Google Scholar for various combinations of “Human resource management”, “internal reputation management”, and “employee voice”, supplemented by additional relevant articles cited by the retrieved sources.

A number of contributions address the role of HRM in managing reputation and corporate brands (Aurand et al., 2005; Chiang, Chang, & Han, 2012; Friedman, 2009; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001; Mahnert & Torres, 2007; Martin, Beaumont, Doig, & Pate, 2005; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2010). Besides emphasizing the significance of appropriate recruiting, training, rewarding, and remuneration, many scholars point to the need for a high commitment HRM approach to developing employees' reputation- and brand-building behaviour and, ultimately, corporate ambassadorship. Measures include reinforcing employees' psychological contracts with their employer (Miles & Mangold, 2004, 2014), empowering the staff (Henkel, Tomczak, Heitmann, & Herrmann, 2007), showing commitment and trusting employees (Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2010), improving employees' job satisfaction (Friedman, 2009; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015), relying on transformational leadership behaviour (Morhart et al., 2009), making sure employees feel supported and appreciated (Cravens & Oliver, 2006), and letting employees find their own way of communicating the organizational brand to customers (Henkel et al., 2007).

Despite this scholarly focus, current research has thus far not significantly examined the organizational- and employee-based implications of reputation-oriented HRM practices. Such a focus could benefit our understanding not only of the effects of reputation management on contemporary organizations but also generate new insights into employee control systems in general, the "people management" aspects of reputation management in particular, and the impact of such systems on employees, including their voice opportunities. In the following we describe how we proceeded to generate such insights.

3. Data and method

3.1. Data sources and collection

The study is based on data from 25 organizations. The organizations were chosen because they are well known in Norway, have a high media profile, and all are large or medium-size organizations. 12 of them are public sector organizations, five are partly public sector organizations, and eight are private sector organizations. Industries represented in the sample are oil and gas, airline, automotive parts and repair, employee unions, education, security and law enforcement, health care, social security, IT, certification services, TV production, and mail and parcel delivery. The average number of employees is 4,000, ranging from 50 to 22,000.

The data come from two sources (Table 2). The first source includes a total of 25 strategy documents from each organization (codes of conduct, communication strategies, or HRM policies) describing internal reputation management procedures, corporate communication policies, and HRM strategies. The second data source is 30 semi-structured interviews (Flick, 2018) with employees and leaders from the 25 organizations. 20 of the 30 interviewees were lower ranking employees and the rest held senior or top management positions. The informants were recruited partly using purposive sampling (Silverman, 2013), partly by the snowballing method (Noy, 2008). Eight informants had voiced critical

remarks about their employer either internally or externally at least once, three of whom had been dismissed partly because of the presumed reputation loss of their communication.

The same interview guide was used for all the interviews, but with different types of probing depending on informant group. Managers were encouraged to describe control systems in practice with respect to reputation management and how they dealt with reputation-supporting employee communication through HRM. Employees were encouraged to speak about their experiences of their organization's reputation management and HRM practices and to give examples of how these practices influence their communication. We perceived the informants as willing to speak about the questions we asked, and we did not experience any "branded" communication during the interviews.

3.2. Data analysis

Content analysis is a frequently used method to explore and make inferences based on observed statements (Holsti, 1969). We used thematic coding (Kuckartz, 2014), a type of content analysis that is especially well suited for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To do so, we relied on the qualitative software analysis programme QDA Miner.

Although thematic coding is often based on grounded theory (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012), our approach is a combination of deductive and inductive analysis (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2017). We follow Kuckartz' (2014) recommendation that initial coding should begin with core concepts from the research question or relevant literature. Thus, we looked for statements in the data relating to the three overarching topics HRM, voice, and reputation. In accordance with the approach used by Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, and Pedersen (2013), one author identified the meaningful units of analysis in the text and coded all the data using these main categories in the first phase of the coding process.

The second coding process was data-driven, exploring the three predefined codes further. The first coder created 53 subcategories based on the concepts used by the informants and then summarized the subcategories into 11 general subcodes. This category system mapped onto the main categories in the following way: HRM orientation (coercive approach, hybrid approach, enabling approach); voice (restricted voice regime, partly restricted voice regime, partly unrestricted voice regime, unrestricted voice regime); and reputation (prominent reputation focus, reputation focus with instrumental drivers, reputation focus with contextual drivers, limited reputation focus). After reviewing and going back and forth between quotes, codes, and emerging patterns in the data, we named the three overarching themes "reputation as organizing principle", "restricted voice", and "hard' HRM", respectively (see emergent data structure in Fig. 1). As a test of coding reliability, the second coder recoded a randomly chosen segment sample on the basis of this coding scheme corresponding to 10 per cent of all segments, without knowing the first coder's coding. Inter-coder agreement was 78.9 per cent ($Kappa = .75$). When remaining differences in coding were resolved, the first coder deployed the final category system on the full set of data.

Table 2
Data sources.

Source	Time span	Quantity
Documents regarding reputation orientation and reputation management in 25 organizations.	2013–2017	25 strategy documents and plans, codes of conduct guidelines, communication policy plans, HRM policy documents.
Interviews with employees and leaders.	2014–2017	30 in-depth interviews with 30 informants (of which 20 are employees and 10 are leaders) from 25 organizations lasting 45–120 min

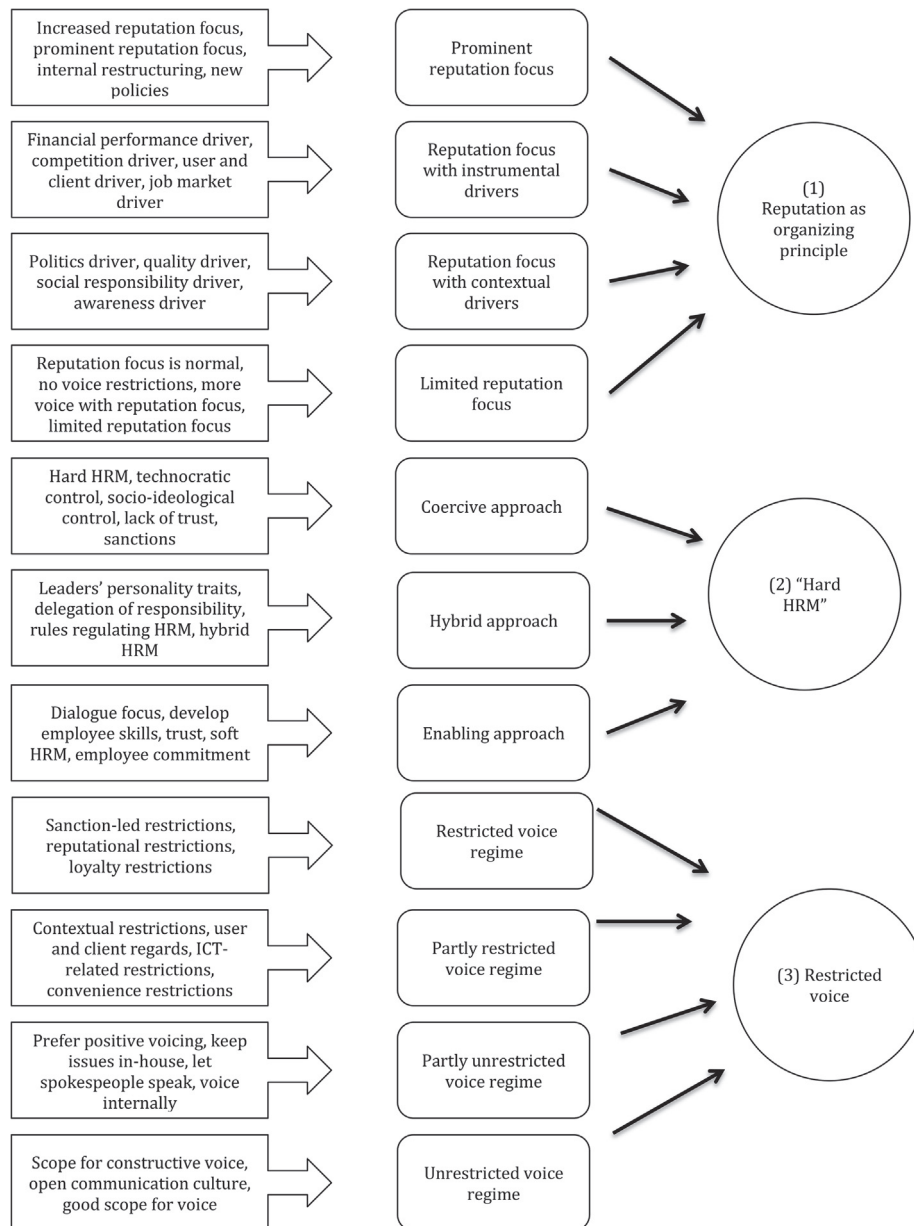


Fig. 1. Emerging data structure.

4. Findings

4.1. Reputation as organizing principle

The first observation to be made from the study concerns the fundamental perceived significance of a favourable reputation. Our informants told us how the strong concern for reputation has changed the “rules of the game” by serving as an internal organizing principle. How members think their organization is perceived by external stakeholders influences how they think, act, decide, and ultimately organize and coordinate organizational activities and processes, including HRM strategies and practices. For example, informants said that the concern for reputation, not surprisingly, makes their organization seek positive media coverage, use the press actively, and maintain profiles on social media. They also described how competition has become a “natural order” underlying all major aspects of their activities. A high school teacher

told us that competition between the schools in his city has become a fundamental premise, making a favourable reputation a necessary part of the – in his words – “untouchable” competitive system:

Competition is the natural order, and you can't be against it because opposing it restricts competitive ability. And reputation – you are dependent on reputation in this competition. Without competition, the school loses pupils (teacher, high school).

A doctor at a large public hospital told a similar story about the hospital sector, which since 1997 has been publicly funded according to how effective they are, measured by the number of patients, consultations, and procedures they treat and carry out:

A market thinking lies beneath it all, where reputation is crucial. In a system with free choice of hospitals, as we have here,

patients will choose hospitals with a good reputation, and in addition, with short waiting lists (employee, public hospital).

Executives described how organizational policies and structures have been changed or designed out of concern for reputation. Besides reputation-oriented HRM (which we will examine below), one example is the introduction of corporate compliance programmes. An executive told us that his company was forced to establish its own corporate compliance board in charge of supervising all internal rules and procedures as a result of a merger with a German company:

A very strange setting for us, but for the Germans, not having this was unimaginable, it was completely natural, (...) it was about the company's external reputation (executive, certification company).

Employees noted how the strong concern for reputation affected their own behaviour as well through self-imposed restrictions. Two informants said; "if you act in ways that damage the corporation's reputation, business will be affected", and "you know that you are more exposed than before, and then you must think twice before you express yourself". Others pointed out how acting in accordance with the organization's desired reputation has become a matter of "being loyal" to the organization. Because not being loyal could represent a problem with respect to future job opportunities or promotions, some employees told us they would refrain from participating in public debates because they were scared of saying something that could hurt the organization's reputation:

You cannot do it, because references from your leaders are all important for your job opportunities, so people will try to not ruin their chances. They understand the rules of the game (former public service employee).

Overall, for our informants, the significance of a favourable reputation is felt in different ways. For employees, a favourable reputation has become a constraining factor regarding what they allow themselves to do and say. For executives, a favourable reputation is at the same time an objective to be achieved and a concern guiding the design of organizational policies and structures. Thus, the new "rules of the game" serve as an organizing principle affecting strategies, actions, thinking, and decisions. [Table 3](#) demonstrates a selection of quotes illustrating this point, as well as quotes pertaining to the two other overarching themes.

4.2. Restricted voice regimes

Most of the informants described a strong managerial conviction that organizational reputation management is more effective when the organization speaks with one single voice rather than multiple voices. With a few exceptions, leaders declared in a straightforward language that employees should take care not to harm the organization's reputation. They told us there should be, and in fact are, clear limitations on what employees can voice, how they voice, and where they voice it, in a few instances also in the private sphere and even after the employee has quit her job. This view is formalized in written guidelines specifying who is authorized to talk to the media and post information about the organization in social media. Examples include a statement taken from a state-owned corporation's codes of conduct handbook saying that "only authorized persons may talk to the media, members of the investment community or make statements on [the company's]

behalf on social media". The personnel handbook of a large employee union stated that "employees shall stay silent about everything they get to know through their work (...) this requirement is valid even after the employment contract has been terminated".

Executives confirmed these policies during our interviews with them by highlighting the need for employees to follow institutional procedures and articulate any concern in-house. One public service executive stated that "you have to voice your concerns through official channels", another said that "here we do not jabber externally about [internal matters]" and that any disagreement should be solved by "discuss[ing] it internally".

However, not all organizations encouraged unrestricted use of voice internally. A high school headmaster offered an example of internal voice restrictions imposed on the entire municipal school system:

This week we received an e-mail from the high school bureaucrats in the town hall, with an invitation to the annual appraisal conversation. Interestingly, the mail outlines very detailed instructions for the conversation, what we can say, how we ought to behave, and even things we should rehearse before the conversation. This, presented to seasoned educators who have had long careers in high schools, is a clear signal that we can say only certain things, that there are other things we cannot say or talk about, and that freedom of expression is limited. (high school headmaster).

As for employees, they clearly saw voice restrictions as a means to preserve their organization's official single voice for reputation management purposes. One employee who had alerted top management about unacceptable practices in her organization said:

My impression was that the organization's reputation became the main focus. The reputation was to be saved no matter what. I noticed this in my communication with top management. "We just don't follow your story", was the mantra every time. They insisted on maintaining an alternative version of the truth, a version that was more in accordance with the values they wanted to fulfil. (...) Employees were not allowed to make statements. This was the domain of the professional communicators (employee, public service).

A former employee in a private company had found himself in a similar situation. He told us he felt like a "brand liability" to the organization; that he had "damaged the company's reputation" because of managers' reactions to something he had said in a newspaper interview that was not considered consistent with the organization's desired reputation. Another employee expressed a similar view:

There was a clear link between reputation orientation and what you could say as an employee. They are dead scared of bad publicity, and I think they felt an uncertainty towards me, that they feared that I would ask the same critical questions in external settings, for example when meeting with dealers, and thus damage the reputation (former employee, state-owned enterprise).

One particularly critical employee we interviewed had been fired partly because of his public criticism of his company's strategies. He stated the following concerning the requirement to subject to a single official voice:

Table 3

Themes and illustrative quotes.

I. Emerging theme: Reputation as organizing principle

"Our new partners wanted a stricter regulation of employee voice than we had at the time. To achieve this, they introduced a new compliance board and two ombudsmen, one for internal matters and one for external matters" (executive, certification company) (example 'internal restructuring')

"In the competitive situation both Telenor and my corporation are in, reputation is crucial. If you act in ways so that the corporation's reputation is damaged, it will affect business". (employee, state-owned corporation) (example 'financial performance driver')

"Reputation is Alfa and Omega, I would say, and here in this part of the city it's what people in the area say and think about that matters, not least in a system with free choice of schools". (headmaster 2, public high school) (example 'user and client driver')

"I live by the saying: Never hide a darkness. I don't think reputation orientation will limit the scope for voice, given that we can discuss matters openly it will rather lead to better scope for voice, to less voice restrictions". (executive, association for local authorities) (example 'more voice with reputation focus')

II. Emerging theme: 'Hard' HRM

"They implement everything from HRM, sick leave, recruitment and quality assurance in the same way as they would carry out an armed call, and that's not the way to do it". (former police employee) (example 'coercive approach')

"The bureaucrats have a strong need for control, on a very detailed level, and we get emails almost daily with detailed instructions on how to do our job". (headmaster 1, public high school) (example 'technocratic control')

"Employees are increasingly being ordered to have attitudes that oppose their own values". (former employee, automotive parts company) (example 'socio-ideological control')

"Gradually I was stripped of tasks and responsibilities. I was denied compensatory time and pay for extra hours (...) The last drop was when he stormed into my office, blocked the doorway, and angrily reprimanded me". (example 'sanctions')

III. Emerging theme: Voice restrictions

"The last workday before Christmas, just before the Christmas holiday, I found a letter on my mail shelf. It turned out to be a formal, written warning including a threat of being fired. So this was the Christmas present I was given by the school's administration". (former secondary school teacher) (example 'sanctions-led restrictions')

"Everything was being streamlined, everyone should have sharp creases in their trousers, march in line, and no-one should say something that the executives disliked". (former airline employee) (example 'little scope for voice')

"With an unfavourable reputation, the school loses pupils, which leads to loss of public funding, and then the school may have to close. My high school lost more than 100 pupils because of bad publicity in the press last year, and the school lost seven million kroner". (public high school teacher) (example 'user and client regards')

"Here you do not cultivate discontent and do not search for negative aspects - that's a clear message from management". (public agency employee) (example 'prefer positive voicing')

Everything was being homogenized, everyone was supposed to have sharp creases in their trousers, march in line, and no one was supposed to say anything that the executives disliked (former pilot, airline company).

Overall, managers and employees highlighted how the strong concern for reputation leads to voice restrictions, especially restrictions on prohibitive voice, and how reputation management involves speaking with one single voice rather than multiple, inconsistent, and potentially reputation-damaging prohibitive voices. An implication seems to be that reputation management in our case organizations aims to limit reputational risk, and that a central means to this end is the restriction of prohibitive voice. In the next section we describe how the 25 organizations manage these reputation-enhancing voice restrictions through systematic control.

4.3. 'Hard' HRM practices

The strong managerial concern for reputation occurs in tandem with increased systematic organizational control over employees through low commitment HRM. This is to say; the organizations predominantly manage their human resources in a way that is meant to coercively instil reputation-oriented behaviour and communication in employees.

Our informants described the control systems as encompassing both socio-ideological and technocratic aspects. As an example of socio-ideological control, a rather critical employee in an automotive parts company stated that "employees are increasingly being ordered to have attitudes that oppose their own values" and that "they will get rid of you if you don't follow their philosophy one hundred per cent. You are supposed to be a robot and not have your own thoughts".

However, overall, technocratic control seems to be the more prevalent form of reputation-enhancing organizational control. As examples of technocratic control, employees reported being exposed to increased direct supervision, micro management, and

detailed instructions concerning reputation-supporting behaviour and especially communication. One high school teacher described how "the alarm goes off" when the grades are not good enough – which is a significant reputational concern – and how managers "take action" when this happens. A public service employee observed that they had been "plagued by consultants" who had "mathematically calculated every need and demand down to the very second".

Informants saw a connection between the increased emphasis on reputation-enhancing control systems and the reduced emphasis on trust in employees. An informant described this tendency in the following way:

This is a classic example of a transition from trust to control, from trust in employees to control of employees. Gradually and almost unnoticeably, there is less trust, it's not a revolution, but we have slowly moved in the direction of more control (employee, certification company).

Several informants were quite critical of these "people management" measures introduced to safeguard reputation. They portrayed the initiatives as unpopular and coercive HRM practices. Two particularly critical informants stated the following:

Today, employees are not worth anything, whereas the company's reputation means everything. Those who do not fit in, are removed (former pilot, airline company).

If someone makes critical remarks, [our managers] interpret the remarks as attacks and possibly a reputation issue. They are less concerned about improving [the organization] (employee, public service)

Most of the informants were clearly not as critical as the last two. Some of them did not report any specific voice restrictions or coercive reputation-protecting HRM measures. A few even noted an increase in the level of perceived trust. One public agency employee, for example, noted that "the HR department seems to

have more trust in employees here than before". Another informant, employed in a public hospital, observed that "the HR department here doesn't practice 'hard' HR to the same extent as [hospital X], which may be the reason why there have been fewer conflicts here lately".

Nevertheless, an important finding from the interviews is that when the official voice of the organization is distorted by an employee's use of prohibitive voice, coercive action is taken by top management. Such action is taken, according to the informants, because top management perceives the employees' voice as inconsistent with the organization's official voice and desired reputation, and therefore not "loyal" to the organization's policies and strategies. Eight of the ten executives stated that they or their organization have taken direct corrective action, either in the form of oral reprimands or formal sanctions, towards employees who have spoken up about their work or their employer. As one manager stated, "employees who do not fulfil their loyalty obligations will face sanctions". Another manager said:

In my former job we were strict, we executed control over managers and what they could express publicly. We stressed the importance of duty and loyalty, and we followed up employees who expressed themselves in ways that could, well, harm the hospital, and yes, we issued a formal warning (executive, public hospital).

Instances prompting such responses from top management included voicing concerns in media interviews, social media posts, newspaper commentaries, internal memos, direct communication with managers and colleagues, as well as a published book, where employees had drawn attention to specific organizational incidents or realities, or criticized top management for specific decisions, policies, a lack of decisions or policies, or other issues. For example, one manager told us he had fired a person who had damaged the organization's reputation on Facebook.

Someone posted something on Facebook (...) it was very negative for the company, and then the senior manager came to me and asked me to find out who had posted the message and then fire the person (manager, certification company).

Such actions were clearly understood by employees as sanctions for what they had said. According to the eight informants who had voiced some form of concern either internally or externally, or both, the sanctions against them included written warnings, restrictions in the employee's possibility to communicate with colleagues and external stakeholders, more direct supervision, threats of internal transfer to a different department, threats of suspension, and in a few cases dismissal. One informant found his freedom to move around restricted:

I was told I couldn't speak to my colleagues unless it was approved by the HR director. And I had to report back [to him] when I wanted to leave the office (employee, law enforcement agency).

The sanctioned employees expressed high frustration when describing the actions taken against them. Descriptions included terms such as "extreme control", "vendetta", "provocative and threatening", "abuse of power", "outright harassment", "treated like a criminal", and "HR as armed call". One informant stated the following:

When [my boss] realized I wasn't a pushover, he chose to reorganize. And then, a terrifying HR process began (...)

encompassing everything ranging from micro-managing, ignoring, and confronting me, to flat out bullying me (employee, IT company).

A few employees reported being affected emotionally and mentally as a result of the sanctions against them. Insomnia, not being able to work, and feelings of being treated as a criminal or leper, were among the problems mentioned. Expressions used to describe their thoughts include "survival mode", "mental breakdown", "everything was dark and difficult", and "suicidal thoughts".

Overall, the informants highlight prohibitive voice as a contested and challenging issue to deal with not only for employees but also for top management. The findings demonstrate how top management's concern for reputation leads to voice restrictions through coercive HRM because multiple, negative employee voices are assumed by top management to jeopardise their organization's single, reputation-building voice. In these reputation-oriented organizations, employees are clearly not considered (and do not consider themselves) corporate ambassadors. Socio-ideological control does not seem to be a sufficient means of appropriately regulating employees' voices. Instead, both proactive and reactive measures of technocratic control are being used through a low commitment, coercive HRM approach.

5. Discussion and conclusions

5.1. Theoretical contributions

We contribute to literatures on organizational reputation management and branding by highlighting organizational and employee-related implications of internal reputation management. Most basically, the findings point to the general impact of reputation management on organizations by showing the strong perceived importance of a favourable reputation across many different types of organizations. Rather than exploring the impact of organizational reputation management on reputation (Doorley & Garcia, 2011; van Riel & Fombrun, 2007), or the impact of reputation on organizations (Fombrun, 2012, pp. 94–113; Rindova, Williamson, Petkova, & Sever, 2005) – two core foci of a number of studies – our study draws attention to how reputation management affects organizations. Moreover, whereas previous studies have examined the impact of perceived organizational reputation on employees' tendency to promote the organization's reputation through their behaviour and voice (Schaarschmidt, 2016), our study shows the implications of reputation-oriented human resource management practices for employees' voice. Specifically, the findings highlight an important "people management" dimension of reputation management in the sense that HRM practices are designed to enhance reputation by preventing prohibitive aspects of employee voice. We illustrate the general links between our focal variables in Fig. 2.

The case organizations presented limited evidence of high commitment HRM emphasized by reputation management and branding literatures as crucial for the transformation of employees into appropriate corporate ambassadors. In contrast to rather optimistic perspectives attributing to managers the ability to trust employees' behaviour and communication to contribute positively towards reputation, our study seems to demonstrate a dominant perception of employees as potential "brand saboteurs" (Wallace & de Chernatony, 2007, 2008) rather than potential "ambassadors" (Alsop, 2004) or "champions" (Ind, 2001). Rather than trust in employees, commitment-instilling employee branding, and little concern about prohibitive voice, in these highly visible and reputation-oriented organizations we found more emphasis on one

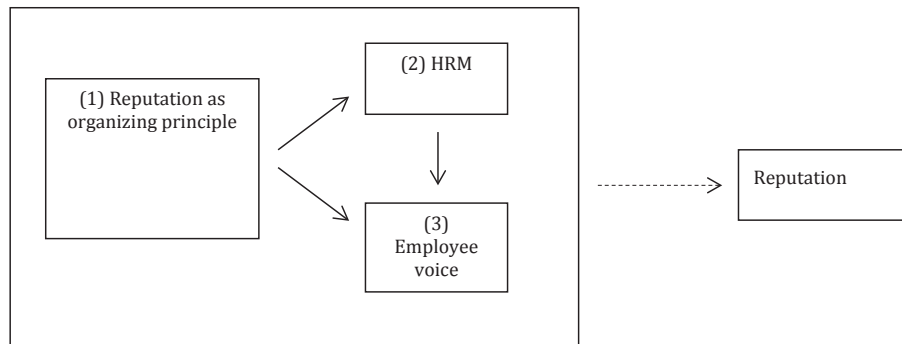


Fig. 2. Illustration of internal reputation management.

single official voice, high concern about prohibitive voice, low trust in employees in matters related to reputation, and coercive, low commitment HRM practices designed to support the desired reputation.

These findings seem consistent with the traditional view on reputation management outlined earlier stating that organizations need to present one single voice to their external constituents if they want to build a favourable reputation. From this perspective, prohibitive voice is a problem and a reputation risk and, therefore, should be controlled through HRM measures involving proactive as well as reactive technocratic control. Proactive measures include detailed rules and policies specifying what employees are allowed to say, when they may say it, and to whom. Reactive measures include applying punitive sanctions of various types after rules and policies are violated, or the “loyalty” of an employee is called into question when he or she has uttered critical and potentially reputation-damaging remarks about the employer.

The gap between the need for high commitment-oriented HRM practices established in previous literatures and the predominantly low commitment HRM measures recounted by our informants in this study is a strong indication of the perceived importance of a favourable reputation. Although the current reputation economy constantly challenges organizations to build and protect their reputation (Hearn, 2010, p. 10), and internal reputation management and branding literatures typically highlight the contribution of high commitment HRM practices towards this end (e.g. Cravens & Oliver, 2006; Friedman, 2009; Morhart et al., 2009), implementing such HRM systems may be more challenging than envisioned by these literatures. The findings suggest that managers worry too much about the reputational risk of employees’ prohibitive voice to design reputation-oriented HRM systems that really promote corporate ambassadorship. They raise the question of whether previous research may have overstated the prevalence and feasibility of high commitment, reputation-oriented HRM systems, and under-represented their challenges for visible organizations in competitive settings where managers worry significantly about reputational loss.

The findings also have implications for our conceptualization of internal branding, employee branding, and internal reputation management. Our study underlines the need to distinguish between internal reputation management on the one hand, and on the other, internal branding and employee branding. Internal reputation management, we suggest, is based on the assumptions that employees’ communication should be minimized and controlled, thereby allowing for an official single voice to dominate, and that employees should not be trusted to contribute to the organization’s desired reputation. Conversely, theories of employee branding and internal branding are typically based on the assumptions that empowered employees’ active communication is

essential for how the organization is perceived, and that employees can be trusted to contribute to the organization’s desired reputation – albeit perhaps after some level of socio-ideological influence. This distinction is important because it differentiates between similar concepts used to denote related processes, thereby helping future research in classifying and analysing observations of internal reputation management and branding processes as well as their organizational and employee-related effects and implications.

Our study also offers an opportunity to reflect on the impact of reputation management on contemporary work life in a more general sense. For example, the finding that coercive HRM entails employee dissatisfaction resonates with other studies revealing that either purely enabling, trust-based HRM (Arthur, 1994; Walton, 1985) or a hybrid trust-based form of HRM with control-oriented elements leads to higher motivation and more intrinsic motivation, increased job satisfaction, and lower turnover intention (Baron, 1999; Delery & Doty, 1996; Hauff, Alewell, & Hansen, 2014). According to social exchange theory, if employees perceive a commitment from their employer to fulfil important employee needs, an obligation in employees to reciprocate is instilled in them (Cerasoli, Nicklin, & Ford, 2014; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kuvaas, 2006; Kuvaas, Buch, Weibel, Dysvik, & Nerstad, 2017; Purcell, 1999), whereas purely coercive, control-oriented HRM does not seem to have this effect (Gould-Williams & Davies, 2005; Jensen, Patel, & Messersmith, 2013; Jiang, Lepak, Hu, & Baer, 2012).

Another work-life implication of our findings concerns the Nordic context in which the study was undertaken. A characteristic of “the Nordic model” is a strong emphasis on democracy at the workplace, high trust in employees, employee participation, involvement, and scope for employee voice (Hilson, 2008). It typically incorporates structural opportunities for prohibitive voice at the workplace, thereby reducing the importance of voicing concerns in social media or other channels outside of the workplace. In this light, the prevalence of coercive HRM in our study seems somewhat surprising. The findings raise the possibility that strong concern for reputation could change fundamental work life arrangements over time. If so, future “voicers” may continue to face difficulties being heard because their voice may not be consistent with the desired reputation of their organization. Changing organization from the bottom-up, then, which employee voice is all about by definition (Bashshur & Oc, 2015; Liang et al., 2012), might be problematic under high concerns for reputation.

5.2. Managerial implications

The findings from this study raise an important practical question concerning the transformation of employees into dedicated corporate ambassadors. The revealed emphasis on HRM practices

aimed at reducing the role of prohibitive employee voice in reputation management makes it difficult to see how employees could possibly perceive themselves and play the role as corporate ambassadors over time. Ultimately, reputation management practices such as the ones described in our study could end up hurting the self-esteem of employees, as implied by our findings, rather than producing committed and “enchanted employees” who experience “deeper meaning” (Sartain, 2005, p. 90) in their work.

As such, the findings illustrate important challenges of managing employees under strong concern for reputation. They point to the need for managers to carefully design HRM systems that do not jeopardise employees' likelihood of behaving in accordance with the desired reputation to the organization. Clearly, HRM could play a crucial role in reputation management, but managers should be aware of the possibility that HRM could both promote and diminish reputation depending on the mix of coercive, low commitment HRM and enabling, high commitment HRM. Too much emphasis on coercive HRM measures with respect to employee voice is likely to reduce employee commitment to behave in accordance with the desired reputation. In other words, if employees are treated as potential brand saboteurs, they might behave as brand saboteurs. If they are treated as ambassadors, they might behave as ambassadors.

5.3. Limitations and future research

A limitation associated with our study is the variation in organizational context. The 30 informants represent 25 organizations with different sizes, purposes, sector affiliations, and overall leadership philosophies and strategies. Although we were able to identify patterns across this variation, future research could group case organizations into different categories according to their HRM systems and examine if reputation management practices and employee voice opportunities vary systematically with these differences. Doing so could provide a test of a hypothesis emerging from our findings that the more concerned organizations are about their reputation, the more likely they are to attempt to prevent prohibitive voice through coercive, low commitment HRM.

This hypothesis, we acknowledge, stands in contrast to dominant literatures on employee branding and internal branding, which implicitly or explicitly state that highly committed employees have (or should have) an increasingly central role the more reputation- or brand-oriented their employer is. This inconsistency points to a need for future research to devote more attention to the role of employees in internal reputation management and branding processes. Of particular interest is the potential tension between, on the one hand, the need to control employees' prohibitive voice as a means of ensuring a single official voice, and on the other, the need to empower employees to ensure efficient reputation-building communication. The question of how organizations experience this tension, and which strategies they pursue to balance these conflicting requirements, should be of great interest for future research into the organizational, managerial, and employee-related aspects of reputation management.

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