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What drives employers' favorability ratings on employer review platforms? The role of symbolic, personal, and emotional content

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Abstract

Employer review platforms have changed the recruitment landscape by allowing current and former employees to post messages about an employer outside of direct company control. Therefore, they have emerged as an important form of third-party employer branding. However, we know little about how such open-ended comments relate to the key variable in employer reviews: employers' favorability rating. Therefore, we start by situating this variable among other constructs in the employer branding space. Next, we build theory on how content in the open-ended comments of an employer review relates to the positivity or negativity of the reviews' favorability rating. We test our hypotheses via a text-mining analysis of approximately half a million employer reviews. The results reveal an intriguing discrepancy. Although instrumental, impersonal, and cognitive content is more prevalent in employer reviews, symbolic, personal, and emotional content dominates employer reviews' favorability rating. In terms of practical implications, this result shows that merely inspecting the frequency of attributes mentioned in employer review text comments as a basis for changing company policies of employer branding efforts might be misguided. We discuss implications for theory and future research, and provide our dictionary for further scholarly and practical use.

KEYWORDS

CATA; employer reviews, employer image; third-party employment branding

Practitioners Points

- Employer review platforms offer insights into employee perceptions beyond an organization's control.
- Symbolic, personal, and emotional content, though less frequent, significantly impacts favorability ratings and should be prioritized in branding.
- Relying solely on attribute frequency in reviews can be misleading.
- Companies should analyze reviews to uncover key drivers of favorability ratings, improving recruitment strategies.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Employer review platforms (e.g., Glassdoor, Indeed, Kununu, Jobplanet, Kanzhun), where employees anonymously post text and numerical evaluations about employers, are gaining traction (Dube & Zhu, 2021). For example, as of 2023, Glassdoor contains more than 150 million items of employer-related information (e.g., reviews, salary reports) and has more than 55 million unique monthly visitors globally (Glassdoor, 2023).

This emergence of employer review platforms and social media has led to a revolution in the recruitment landscape. In the past, job seekers developed their image of an employer mainly on the basis of company-controlled image information (Benraïss-Noailles & Viot, 2021; Deephouse & Jaskiewicz, 2013). Today, employer review platforms that operate outside company control also inform job seekers and may constitute an important instance of third-party employer (TPE) branding, which refers to “communications, claims, or status-based classifications generated by parties outside of direct company control that shape, enhance, and differentiate organizations’ images as favorable or unfavorable employers” (Dineen et al., 2019, p. 176).

Alongside the increasing popularity of employer review platforms, research on employer reviews has also been flourishing. For instance, several experimental studies have demonstrated that employer reviews *can* have an effect on job seekers’ attitudes and intentions towards employers, as such reviews may be perceived to be more credible than the company view (e.g., Evertz et al., 2021; Könsgen et al., 2018; Melián-González & Bulchand-Gidumal, 2016; Schaarschmidt et al., 2021; Stockman et al., 2019). Other studies used data-mining software (such as IBM Watson or Leximancer) to identify content characteristics in employer reviews of companies (e.g., Dabirian et al., 2017; Dabirian et al., 2019; Lam et al., 2022; Ross et al., 2017). Further studies investigated which specific job benefits influence the favorability rating (Querbach et al., 2022), how incentives might reduce bias in online reviews (Marinescu et al., 2021), how people process discrepant reviews (Könsgen et al., 2018), and how negative employer reviews can be dealt with (e.g., Carpentier & Van Hove, 2021; Kollitz et al., 2022). Finally, there is a considerable body of research using the data from employer review platforms—rather than focusing on the employer review platform phenomenon itself—to measure otherwise hard-to-obtain data, such as data on organizational values and authenticity (Deeds Pamphile & Ruttan, 2022), employer reputation (Sharkey et al., 2022), organizational and work culture (Bergstrom, 2022; Canning et al., 2020), and work–life balance (Hope et al., 2021).

Although prior research shows that an employer’s favorability rating, as provided by former or current employees in reviews, can affect job seekers’ attitudes and intentions toward employers, the specific aspects captured by the favorability rating have not been scrutinized. Specifically, prior research assumed the favorability rating to reflect different constructs, such as job satisfaction (e.g., Landers et al., 2019), employee satisfaction (e.g., Huang et al., 2015;

Querbach et al., 2022), organizational evaluations (e.g., Pamphile & Ruttan, 2022), company reputation (e.g., Schaarschmidt et al., 2021), and public affective evaluation (e.g., Sharkey et al., 2022). While it is true that the favorability rating is typically a summary of the numerical evaluations given on various dimensions referring to job and organizational attributes (e.g., compensation, culture, values), other content and stylistic information from reviews’ open-ended comments might also be associated with their ratings.

The current lack of insight into what goes into the favorability rating is problematic. First, the contents of employer reviews and favorability ratings are essentially descriptions of employer knowledge from current and former employees. As such, employer reviews serve as written transcriptions of the features these constituents associate with an employer and thus enable job seekers, companies, and researchers to “peek” into the minds of former and current employees. As it is generally acknowledged that employer knowledge is of paramount importance to better understand applicant attraction and retention (Cable & Turban, 2001), we should scrutinize the content of employer reviews and how content/style characteristics of open-ended comments affect how a company is overall evaluated in such reviews.

Second, only scrutinizing the open-ended comments without relating them to the favorability rating might result in companies drawing misleading conclusions. Today, many companies scrutinize the comments on employer review websites in combination with other approaches (e.g., exit interviews, engagement surveys) to discover attraction and retention drivers (Saini & Kaura, 2018). For instance, upon inspection of the open-ended comments, companies might conclude that content referring to instrumental job-related factors (e.g., pay, advancement opportunities) is more prevalent than content referring to symbolic factors (e.g., a caring company). Companies might then act on these analyses by changing their company policies and/or employer branding efforts. However, such efforts might be misguided because the prevalence of specific factors in employer reviews might not necessarily imply that these factors also receive substantial weight in the employers’ favorability rating. Such deeper analyses that uncover which content/style characteristics really matter can be obtained only by capturing the judgment policy of reviewers.

To that end, we adopt an approach that shares similarities with policy-capturing (e.g., Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Aiman-Smith et al., 2002; Karren & Barringer, 2002) to examine the influence of review content and style (i.e., personal/impersonal, symbolic/instrumental, and emotional/cognitive content) on reviews’ favorability ratings. To do so, we convert these content categories into quantitative measures using computer-aided text analysis (CATA). We capture the valence of the reviews through their favorability ratings and utilize dominance analyses as the appropriate methodological approach. Our focus on reviewers’ actual open-ended comments ensures that our study is unobtrusive (unprompted by researchers) and, hence, has ecological validity.

2 | THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 | Employer reviews: What is the employer's favorability rating?

Online employer reviews contain various parts. Specifically, each employer is evaluated by current or former employees on a set of dimensions, which may include career opportunities, culture and values, and/or work-life balance. These separate dimension evaluations are then mechanically combined into a positive or negative favorability rating. In some cases, symbols (e.g., stars) are used to graphically display the favorability rating (via a proprietary formula). Apart from these numeric ratings, open-ended comments provided by current or former employees further describe the employer. It is noteworthy to mention that while reviews by (rejected) applicants also exist on employer review platforms, offering insights into the application experience, such as interviewer behavior, these reviews are distinctly different in both template and content from the reviews by current and former employees. For this study's purpose, our focus remains on reviews by current and former employees, as they offer descriptions of the actual experience of working for the employer, offering a nuanced perspective that is distinct from the outsider view provided by (rejected) applicants.

As the employer's favorability rating serves as the key variable in employer reviews, it is important to situate it among established constructs in the employer branding space. To this end, we rely on Lievens and Slaughter's (2016, p. 409) categorization. They compared established constructs such as reputation, image, and identity on various criteria (e.g., stability, level of abstraction, type of constituent). For example, they defined employer image as an *amalgamation of transient mental representations of specific aspects of a company as an employer as held by outsiders*, such as (prospective) applicants.

The favorability rating that can be found in employer reviews shares some conceptual characteristics with this definition of employer *image*, because it is also a composite of transient mental representations of specific company aspects (e.g., the various Glassdoor or Kununu dimensions to be evaluated). However, it is also conceptually different from this definition because it does not capture the view of outsiders but rather that of insiders, namely current or former employees. Thus, it is based on current or former employees' actual experience of working for the company. Accordingly, it gives voice to bottom-up input from organizational members (i.e., employees). Given that it accrues from employees' actual experience of working for the company, it shares this characteristic with Lievens and Slaughter's (2016) definition of *identity*. As detailed below, this shared characteristic is important due to its implications for the content/style categories that we expect to be valued more heavily in the favorability rating.

Methodologically, there are also differences. Whereas in the past all constructs in Lievens and Slaughter's (2016) categorization were typically assessed via surveys asking individual constituents to evaluate their employer on various dimensions (see Highhouse et al., 1999, for an example in the fast-food industry; see Lievens &

Highhouse, 2003, for an example in the bank industry), today's employees post this via social media platforms in the form of an employer review on dedicated websites (Glassdoor, Indeed, Kununu, etc.). As detailed below, this reliance on social media platforms also has important implications for our theorizing.

In sum, we define employer reviews' favorability ratings as an amalgamation of transient mental representations of an employer that company insiders (current or former employees) post on dedicated employer review websites. Subsequently, these ratings might serve as an increasingly important source of information that people take into consideration when applying for (or resigning from) a job in a given company (see, e.g., Evertz et al., 2021; Könsgen et al., 2018; Melián-González & Bulchand-Gidumal, 2016; Schaarschmidt et al., 2021; Stockman et al., 2019).

2.2 | Which content characteristics dominate employers' favorability ratings in reviews?

Postings on online employer review platforms are essentially social media messages. Various theories have posited that social media have fundamentally changed the way opinions on the quality, competence, and character of organizations are generated and spread (e.g., Etter et al., 2019). Therefore, to theorize about the content/style posted by former and current employees in their employer reviews and its relevance in determining whether a company receives a favorable rating (i.e., how many stars employees assign to the company), it is useful to draw upon recent insights on the formation of organizational reputation in the wake of social media (e.g., Etter et al., 2019; Mena et al., 2016; Ravasi et al., 2018; Rindova et al., 2018; Schrempf-Stirling et al., 2016). These theories focus not only on the role of information cues disseminated by organizational agents themselves or by traditional news media but also on the role of information cues disseminated through social media, such as blogs, discussion forums, social networks, and review websites.

In particular, the central premise of Etter et al.'s (2019) new media reputation formation (NMRF) framework is that the information about organizations disseminated via social media is likely to differ conceptually from that in analytical and relatively neutral reviews, such as those by journalists (Etter et al., 2019), and from company-controlled information (Dineen et al., 2019). Etter et al. (2019) posit that information about organizations disseminated by social media users differs in terms of (a) the *source* of information, (b) the *motive* for providing it, and (c) the format and style *constraints* on producing and disseminating it. We draw on these three axioms of the NMRF framework to guide our theorizing on the content/style and favorability of employer reviews disseminated by former and current employees.

First, related to the *source* of the information, we hypothesize that first-hand experiences and thus personal content (e.g., "I was offered numerous development opportunities"), in contrast to impersonal content (e.g., "There are numerous opportunities for development"), are of particular importance in online reviews

presented by former and current employees. We base our hypothesis on the following rationales derived from the NMRF framework and Lievens and Slaughter's (2016) categorization. Employer review platforms can be considered systematic, large-scale word-of-mouth media (Mangold & Faulds, 2009) that enable current and former employees to publish their first-hand experiences on a variety of workplace topics. In other words, employer review platforms are explicitly dedicated to providing information largely based on personal experiences (Dabirian et al., 2017; Dineen & Allen, 2013; Dineen et al., 2019) rather than serving as outlets for impersonal, report-like employer image information. Second, as outlined above, the favorability rating also reflects employees' perceived identity of the company—that is, "what organizational insiders (employees) perceive to be core characteristics" (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016, p. 410). Therefore, if employees define themselves in terms of the organization to which they belong, as stipulated by social identity theory (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016), then the self should be substantially involved when providing favorability ratings. Hence, employees' favorability rating should be dominated by personal, identity-related (vs. impersonal) content and style. Correspondingly, Dineen et al. (2019) considered online employer reviews to be among the "personal sources" (p. 193) that provide employer information.

Prior evidence suggests that an individual's linguistic style depends on whether the content being shared is personal or impersonal. Personal experiences tend to be conveyed using first-person singular pronouns (e.g., "I," "me," "my"), as they reflect a focus on one's own experiences (Davis & Brock, 1975; Rude et al., 2004; Tackman et al., 2019; Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). Conversely, when discussing content that is not directly related to oneself, there is a tendency to use third-person and impersonal pronouns (e.g., "it," "he," "she"; Gunsch et al., 2000; Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). This linguistic choice suggests psychological distancing from the content discussed, which can manifest in a more objective, detached, and unbiased communication style (Jin, 2005; Parhankangas & Renko, 2017; Toma & D'Angelo, 2015). Hence:

Hypothesis 1. Employer reviews' favorability ratings are dominated by the use of personal (vs. impersonal) content.

Second, we reason that the favorability rating is dominated by the use of symbolic rather than instrumental content. Employer image attributes are often categorized using the instrumental-symbolic framework (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Instrumental attributes (e.g., pay, location, and career opportunities) refer to the objective, physical, and tangible attributes of a job/organization, whereas symbolic attributes (e.g., sincerity, innovativeness) are its subjective, abstract, and intangible attributes (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Based on our reasoning that the favorability rating reflects employees' perceived identity, we expect that symbolic rather than instrumental content will dominate the favorability rating. Specifically, unlike instrumental attributes, symbolic attributes are tied to individuals' concern for social identity and self-expression (Highhouse et al., 2007). Accordingly, employer

reviews may especially be dominated by symbolic content (e.g., "This is a caring organization") that allows former and current employees to engage in self-expression (Berger, 2014; Hollenbaugh, 2010).

In a similar vein, the NMRF framework posits that social media allow users to create and express individual, social, and organizational identities by emphasizing characteristics of organizations that are reflective of their values and beliefs (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Papacharissi, 2013). In other words, social media users express themselves by selecting what they discuss to address their personal motives (Berger, 2014; Hollenbaugh, 2010). Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2. Employer reviews' favorability ratings are dominated by the use of symbolic (vs. instrumental) content.

Third, we reason that the favorability rating is dominated by emotional rather than cognitive content. Our rationale is based on the assumption that the favorability rating also has an affective component, in light of theoretical and empirical evidence on the affective side of identity (Ashforth et al., 2008, 2020; Edwards, 2005; Johnson et al., 2012; van Dick, 2001). Hence, we argue that emotional rather than cognitive content should dominate the favorability rating. Especially in the context of social media (which employer review platforms represent), we contend that emotions will be stronger than cognitions in determining the favorability rating. Emotional content refers to the expression of emotions in text via words such as "happy," "cried," and "hurt" (see Bantum & Owen, 2009). It contrasts with cognitive content, which refers to the expression of cognitive processing in text via words such as "think," "because," and "know"; see Barclay & Skarlicki, 2009). Specifically, Etter et al. (2019) argues that it is common to express emotions on social media, and this argument is also supported by ample empirical evidence (Tumasjan, 2024). In this vein, prior research shows that the decision to post a review online is typically motivated by strong emotions (Berger, 2014). Hence, we expect that these emotions will not only manifest in the content of online reviews (Toubiana & Zietsma, 2017) but also determine the favorability rating given to the company. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. Employer reviews' favorability rating is dominated by the use of emotional (vs. cognitive) content.

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Research context

To test our hypotheses, we analyzed approximately half a million employer reviews published between May 2007 and June 2018 on Kununu, the largest European employer review platform. Since its launch in 2007, Kununu has invited current and former employees to anonymously submit reviews about their employers. The reviews include both open text comments and quantitative ratings, which are

summarized in an average rating (i.e., a review's favorability rating, ranging from 1.00 to 5.00 stars). Text comments may comprise various aspects of the employer, such as company culture, work-life balance, and work environment, as well as comments on the perceived pros, cons, and so on. Importantly, our data set does not include reviews from (rejected) applicants because they differ significantly in content and style from those provided by former and current employees.

Kununu (2023) is dedicated to maintaining the authenticity of employer reviews on its platform by implementing a rigorous, yet streamlined and simple-to-use, verification process involving both automated and manual checks. When users submit a review, they must provide a valid email address, which remains confidential, to facilitate adherence to Kununu's guidelines. The verification process begins with an automated filter scanning the submitted review for specific keywords that may violate guidelines (e.g., names or offensive language) or necessitate manual verification. This filter also identifies potential abuse, including multiple submissions from the same user or suspicious activities on the employer's profile. In cases where issues are detected, a content quality and support team conducts a manual examination by reading the review, comparing metadata, and analyzing potential duplicate submissions. If the team uncovers problematic content or unsubstantiated claims, they will contact the user via email and request changes, additional information, or proof of employment at the reviewed company. Reviews that adhere to the platform's guidelines will not be deleted or altered (Kununu, 2019). Furthermore, Kununu's commitment to protecting user data and ensuring anonymity has been independently certified by TÜV Saarland (2019).

3.2 | Data

Our sample comprised 623,555 online employer reviews submitted by current and former employees of Germany-based employers between May 2007 and June 2018. In detail, our sample included all online reviews of German employers that had received at least two reviews by July 2018. We excluded Austrian, Swiss, U.S.-American, and other non-Germany-based employers to ensure the homogeneity of the review texts (e.g., regarding dialects or country-specific terminology). We conducted review-level analyses using only employer reviews that (a) included text comments (430,365 of 623,555) and (b) did not consist solely of, for example, single characters or erroneous terms (429,219 of 430,365), in the latter case because no words could be matched to the DE-LIWC2015 dictionary (Meier et al., 2018; see below). In summary, we conducted our analyses with 429,219 reviews of 21,414 German employers posted over 45 quarters.

3.3 | Measures

CATA allows us to identify the (co-)occurrence of content/style characteristics in our extensive data set of online employer reviews.

Specifically, we measure the extent of personal/impersonal, symbolic/instrumental, and emotional/cognitive content in online employer reviews through Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software. LIWC estimates the presence (i.e., percentage) of grammatical and psychological categories in text by matching the words with predefined content dictionaries (Pennebaker et al., 2003, 2015; Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). More specifically, in our study, LIWC calculates the presence of a category in percent (from 0% to 100%) by dividing the number of words in an employer review that can be assigned to a category by the total number of words in the review. Categories (i.e., lists of words) measured with content dictionaries are built based on the assumption that their underlying artifacts share the same meaning. In this vein, LIWC includes an empirically validated dictionary to measure individuals' beliefs, fears, thought patterns, social relationships, and personalities (Pennebaker et al., 2015). We use LIWC since it has been used widely in extant research across different disciplines and can therefore be considered an established standard approach for CATA (e.g., Koutsoumpis et al., 2022; Sadler-Smith et al., 2022; Tumasjan et al., 2011; Yin et al., 2014).

In our study, we utilized the most recent German adaptation of the LIWC dictionary (DE-LIWC2015), which contains 18,711 words, word stems, and emoticons in 80 categories (Meier et al., 2018). Furthermore, as elaborated below, we developed and utilized a custom dictionary, which contains 938 words and word stems in 17 categories, as a supplement to LIWC. We assessed the following categories to capture the content of employer reviews.

3.3.1 | Personal/impersonal content

We measured the presence of personal/impersonal content in online employer reviews using DE-LIWC2015's capability to measure the extent of personal and impersonal pronouns in text. Thus, we measured whether employees wrote their reviews in a personal style based on the extent of their use of first-person singular pronouns (e.g., "I," "me," "my"; DE-LIWC2015's "1st person singular" category). Furthermore, we measured whether employees wrote their reviews in an impersonal style based on the extent of using third-person singular and plural pronouns (e.g., "she," "him," "they"; DE-LIWC2015's "3rd person" category) as well as impersonal pronouns (e.g., "it," "it's," "those"; DE-LIWC2015's "Impersonal pronouns" category). As DE-LIWC2015 offers no category that measures the extent of third-person singular/plural pronouns and impersonal pronouns simultaneously, we created a new category combining the separate DE-LIWC2015 categories without duplicates (only two words occurred in both categories: "dessen" [whose] and "einem" [an]).

3.3.2 | Symbolic/instrumental content

We measured the presence of symbolic/instrumental employer image attributes in online employer reviews by developing a novel

dictionary using an approach similar to that of the LIWC dictionary. We followed the recommendations of Short et al. (2010) in constructing our dictionary to capture symbolic and instrumental employer image attributes in online employer reviews. To establish content validity (i.e., the extent to which a measure captures all features of a particular construct; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1993), we constructed our dictionary via a combined approach. Specifically, we created our dictionary first deductively on the basis of theory, then inductively on the basis of the online reviews in our data set; finally, we merged the two results. Accordingly, we followed an approach similar to Theurer et al. (2022) for dictionary development, involving both deductive and inductive methods. However, unlike Theurer et al. (2022), who analyzed content from Fortune 500 companies' websites, our dictionary was uniquely developed to fit measurement of online employer reviews. This difference in data sources is critical, as it necessitates a tailored adaptation of the dictionary to accurately reflect the distinct nature of online employer reviews compared to corporate communications. Table 1 displays the symbolic/

instrumental attributes of employer image, as measured by our dictionary, along with example words for each attribute. The procedure is described in the Supporting Information Appendix. For researchers and practitioners interested in using this dictionary, it is available for download and can be integrated into the LIWC software. The download link is provided in the Supporting Information Appendix.

3.3.3 | Emotional/Cognitive content

We measured the presence of emotional/cognitive content in online employer reviews using DE-LIWC2015's "affective processes" and "cognitive processes" categories. Words in the affective processes category (e.g., "happy," "nice," "hate") represented the degree to which employees expressed both positive and negative emotions through their employer reviews. Words in the cognitive processes category (e.g., "cause," "think," "know") represented the depth and

TABLE 1 Categories and subcategories in the employer image attributes dictionary.

Employer image attribute	German example words (translated into English)	#words
Instrumental attributes	elterngeld (parental allowance), arbeitsabläufe (work processes), branchendurchschnitt* (industry average)	628
Benefits	elterngeld (parental allowance), altersvorsorge (pension scheme), kostenlos* (free)	79
Challenging work	arbeitsabläufe (work processes), aufgabenspektrum (range of tasks), eigeninitiative (self-initiative)	76
Compensation	branchendurchschnitt* (industry average), einkommen (income), entlohnung (compensation)	59
Development & career opportunities	aufstiegschancen (promotion opportunities), berufsbegleitend* (part-time), fortbildung* (further education)	62
Flexible working hours	arbeitszeit* (working hours), familienfreundlich* (family-friendly), homeoffice (home office)	73
Job security	abgebaut (reduced), befrist* (fixed-term), fristlos* (without notice)	57
Leader behavior	feedbackgespräche (feedback meetings), honoriert* (rewarded), personalführung (personnel management)	77
Location	bahnhof* (train station), parkplätze (parking spaces), lage (location)	49
Organizational & team climate	ansprechpartner* (contact person), kameradschaft* (comradeship), mitarbeiterbeziehung* (employee relationship)	95
Travel opportunities	betriebsreise* (business trip), flug* (flight), reise* (travel)	20
Symbolic attributes	erfahr* (experience), ethi* (ethics), kreatives (creative)	328
Competence	erfahr* (experience), kompeten* (competent), konsistent* (consistent)	56
Corporate social responsibility	ethi* (ethics), gemeinnütz* (non-profit), nachhaltig* (sustainable)	54
Innovativeness	kreatives (creative), zukunft* (future), innov* (innovative)	53
Prestige	berühmt* (famous), geschätzt* (appreciated), populär* (popular)	35
Ruggedness	domin* (dominant), rücksichtslos* (reckless), taff* (tough)	36
Sincerity	angenehm* (pleasant), aufrichtig* (sincere), authentisch* (authentic)	71
Sophistication	elegan* (elegant), exklusiv* (exclusive), gehoben* (upscale)	35

Note: "#words" refers to the number of different words and word stems that make up the dictionary category. Words may occur in more than one category. In Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count, the asterisk (*) serves as a wildcard, meaning that subsequent characters are disregarded. For instance, "flug*" encompasses not just "flug" (flight) but also related terms such as "flugzeug" (aeroplane) and "flugreise" (air travel). The example words were translated from Germany to English using DeepL (<https://www.deepl.com/>).

complexity of thinking when employees evaluated their employers through their reviews.

3.3.4 | Favorability rating

An employer review's favorability rating, commonly expressed on a 5-point scale, represents its key quantitative feature. For example, Glassdoor awards its "Best Places to Work Awards" based on companies' favorability rating (Glassdoor, 2019). Kununu's employer reviews display a favorability rating (from 1.0 to 5.0 stars), which is calculated as the average of individual star ratings (from 1.0 to 5.0 stars) across 13 employer dimensions (e.g., corporate culture, management support, teamwork). By aggregating the individual star ratings into a composite rating (i.e., the employer's favorability rating), Kununu assumes that a reflective model underlies its measurements. We validated this assumption by evaluating the internal consistency (Cronbach's α) of these individual dimension ratings ($\alpha = .97$; 95% confidence interval [CI] [0.97, 0.97]). Employer reviews with a favorability rating of one star (vs. five stars) reflect a very negative (vs. very positive) review. Figure 1 presents a Kununu review with a favorability rating of 4.06 stars.

3.4 | Analyses

Our analyses sought to assess the relative importance of content characteristics (i.e., personal/impersonal, symbolic/instrumental, and emotional/cognitive) for the favorability ratings in employer reviews. First, given the nested nature of our data set, we applied hierarchical linear modeling (HLM; see, e.g., Hofmann et al., 2000; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) to model the influence of personal/impersonal, symbolic/instrumental, and emotional/cognitive content on favorability rating. Second, we applied dominance analysis (e.g., Luo & Azen, 2013) to determine the importance of the predictors in the identified model.

3.4.1 | HLM

The data in our study were nested. Ignoring this nested structure when regressing content characteristics on favorability ratings may result in biased estimates of the standard errors of the regression coefficients (e.g., Moerbeek, 2004). Therefore, we fitted a cross-classified random-effects model in which employer reviews comprising content characteristics and favorability ratings (Level 1) were nested within employers and quarters at the same time (Level 2), whereas employers and quarters were not nested within but crossed with each other. To estimate the effects on the favorability rating, we used full maximum likelihood estimation. This also allowed us to conduct deviance tests to assess improvements in model fit due to the addition of predictors (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002).

3.4.2 | Dominance analysis

Building upon the estimation of the effects of our predictors, we sought to compare the relative importance of each predictor to test our hypotheses. Dominance analysis is one of the most frequently applied methods for determining the relative importance of predictors (Braun et al., 2019). To determine which predictor contributes a larger proportion, we compared the predictors' contributions to the explained variance of every possible subset model. Dominance analysis permits the investigation of three levels of dominance: complete, conditional, and general. The strictest form of dominance (i.e., complete dominance) implies that the additional contribution of one predictor (e.g., personal, symbolic, or emotional content) to the explained variance of every possible subset model is greater than that of another predictor (e.g., impersonal, instrumental, or cognitive content). We measured the explanatory power of our models, and thus of our predictors, using the approach proposed by Snijders and Bosker (1994), which determines a two-level HLM model's Level 1 variance (R_1^2) as the proportional reduction of the error in predicting Level 1 outcomes.

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Descriptive statistics

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among all study variables are presented in Table 2. As shown in Table 2, the mean favorability rating was 3.46 ($SD = 1.23$) on a 5-point scale. It had only moderate negative skewness (-0.529). In addition, employer reviews in our data set incorporated on average less personal content (0.96%) than impersonal content (5.88%), less symbolic content (4.59%) than instrumental content (16.35%), and less emotional content (10.35%) than cognitive content (19.13%).

4.2 | Which review characteristics dominate the favorability rating?

Hypotheses 1–3 propose that personal, symbolic, and emotional content will play a dominant role in determining whether a more positive or more negative evaluation is presented in employer reviews. Therefore, as the first step, we fitted a cross-classified random-effects model with personal/impersonal, symbolic/instrumental, and emotional/cognitive content as predictors and with the favorability rating (from positive to negative) presented by an employer review as the outcome variable. Our model decreased the deviance by 36394.40 compared to a null model (i.e., a model without any predictors), indicating a better fit than that of the null model ($p < .001$). As shown in Table 3, personal content (0.068, $p < .001$) was positively associated with favorability rating, whereas impersonal content (-0.003 , $p < .001$) was negatively associated with favorability rating. In terms of the magnitude of the effect, employer

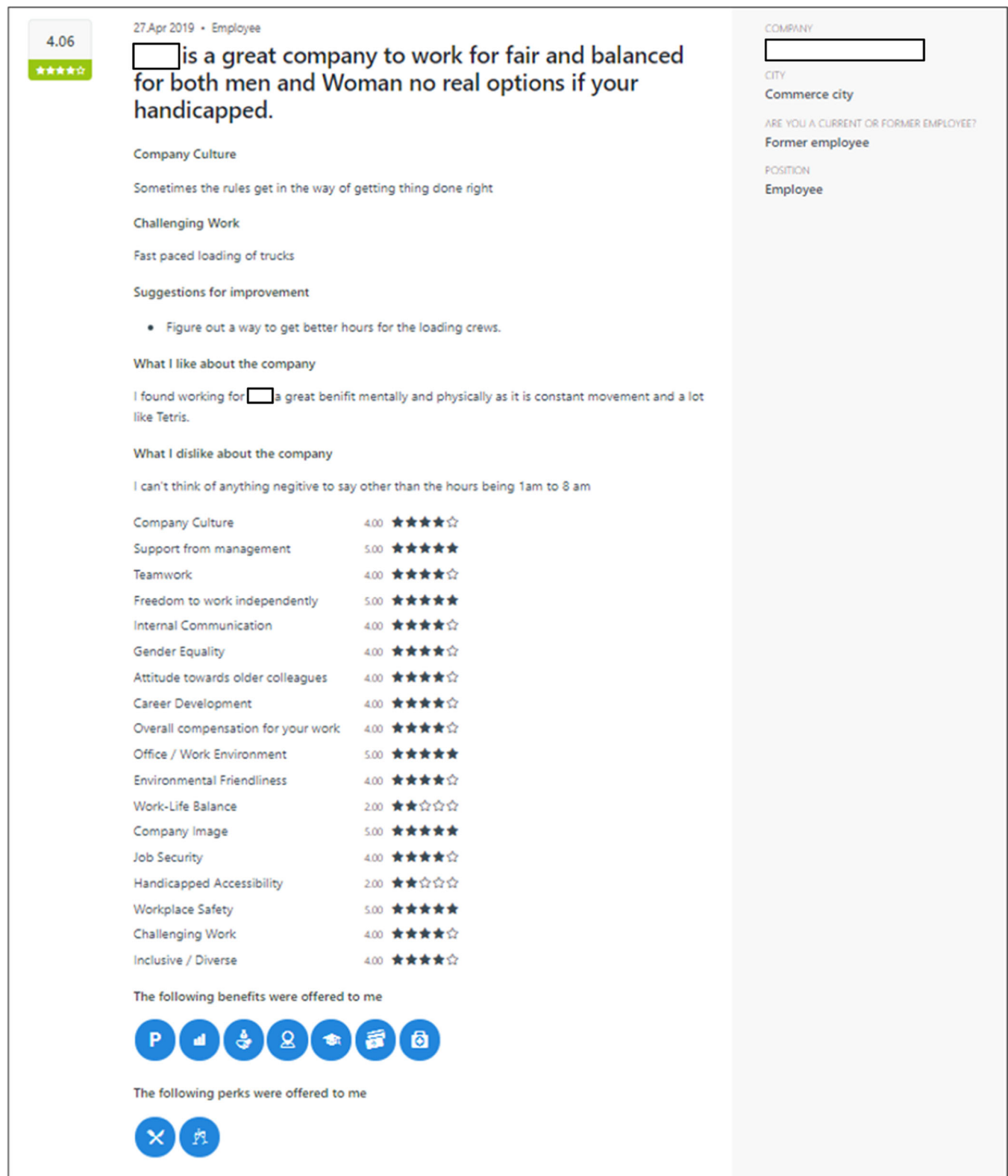


FIGURE 1 A sample employer review with a 4.06 favorability rating from Kununu's U.S. website.

reviews that featured 10% personal content were rated 0.68 stars higher than reviews that featured 0% personal content. Moreover, 0.68 stars represents 19.65% of the average favorability rating of all employer reviews in our sample ($M = 3.46$). Furthermore, symbolic

(0.023, $p < .001$) and instrumental content (0.009, $p < .001$) were also positively associated with favorability rating. Employer reviews that featured 10% symbolic content were rated 0.23 stars higher than reviews that featured 0% symbolic content, representing 6.65% of the

TABLE 2 Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables.

		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Personal content	0.96	2.52						
2	Impersonal content	5.88	6.29	0.019***					
3	Symbolic content	4.59	6.91	-0.079***	-0.171***				
4	Instrumental content	16.35	14.71	-0.157***	-0.295***	0.301***			
5	Emotional content	10.35	9.09	-0.045***	-0.157***	0.206***	0.333***		
6	Cognitive content	19.13	10.45	0.053***	0.263***	0.008***	-0.172***	-0.023***	
7	Favorability rating	3.46	1.23	0.117***	-0.110***	0.212***	0.194***	0.166***	-0.070***

Note: *N* = 429,219 reviews of 21,414 employers over 45 quarters. All variables represent percentages (0.00–100.00), except for the favorability rating which is on a 5-point scale.

p* < .05; *p* < .01; ****p* < .001.

TABLE 3 Hierarchical linear modeling of content characteristics on favorability rating.

Predictor	Favorability rating		
	Estimate	SE	<i>t</i>
<i>Regression coefficients (fixed part)</i>			
(Intercept)	2.948	0.0328	89.76***
Personal content	0.068	0.0007	102.57***
Impersonal content	-0.003	0.0003	-11.76***
Symbolic content	0.023	0.0003	90.01***
Instrumental content	0.009	0.0001	67.42***
Emotional content	0.011	0.0002	59.98***
Cognitive content	-0.005	0.0002	-30.71***
<i>Variance components (random part)</i>			
Employer	0.342	0.5850	
Quarter	0.045	0.2123	
Residual	1.077	1.0378	
<i>Model summary</i>			
Deviance (-2LL)	1,283,612.10		
Decrease in deviance, <i>df</i> (6)	36,394.40***		

Note: *N* = 429,219 reviews of 21,414 employers over 45 quarters. Decrease in deviance indicates model fit increase by comparing the model to a null model (i.e., a model that included no predictors).

p* < .05; *p* < .01; ****p* < .001.

average favorability rating. Finally, while emotional content (0.011, *p* < .001) was positively associated with favorability rating, cognitive content (-0.005, *p* < .001) was negatively associated with it. Employer reviews that featured 10% emotional content were rated 0.11 stars higher than reviews featuring 0% emotional content, representing 3.18% of the average favorability rating. The variance components revealed that employer-related factors (employer variance of 0.342) had a greater impact on rating variability than the timing of reviews (quarter variance of 0.045), with unmeasured individual

influences also contributing significantly to the differences in favorability ratings (residual variance of 1.077).

After fitting the model, as the second step, we conducted a dominance analysis to compare the relative importance of the model's Level 1 predictors (i.e., review content characteristics) in explaining the variance in its Level 1 outcome variable (i.e., favorability rating). Our results show that an additional 9.90% of the total Level 1 variance (R_1^2) in reviews' favorability ratings (compared to the null model) can be explained through the content characteristics measured with LIWC—namely, personal/impersonal, symbolic/instrumental, and emotional/cognitive content.

Hypothesis 1 states that personal (vs. impersonal) content will play a dominant role in determining the favorability ratings of employer reviews. In terms of the relative importance of these six predictors, the dominance analysis revealed that personal content completely dominates impersonal content, as the contribution of personal content is higher than the additional contribution of impersonal content for every subset model. Accordingly, the average additional contribution of personal content to the null model was 1.82%, and that of impersonal content was 0.39%, supporting Hypothesis 1.

In line with Hypothesis 2, which posits that symbolic content rather than instrumental content will play a dominant role in determining favorability ratings, symbolic content completely dominates instrumental attributes. Specifically, the average additional contribution to the null model was greater for symbolic (3.41%) than for instrumental content (2.35%).

Finally, in accordance with Hypothesis 3, which posits that emotional content rather than cognitive content will play a dominant role in determining favorability ratings, emotional content completely dominates cognitive content. Emotional content added an average contribution of 1.70% to the null model, while cognitive content added 0.31%. In addition to testing our hypotheses, the dominance analysis showed that symbolic attributes completely dominated not only instrumental attributes but also every other predictor in our model. Thus, symbolic attributes had the most dominant role in determining favorability.

4.3 | Additional analyses

4.3.1 | Relative importance of attributes within main categories

To complement our main analysis of symbolic and instrumental attributes as main categories, we analyzed the relative importance of individual attributes within these main categories. These analyses illuminate which instrumental and symbolic attributes are especially salient in determining favorability ratings. In the main category of instrumental attributes, dominance analysis showed that organizational and team climate completely dominated every other instrumental attribute. Moreover, challenging work completely dominated every other instrumental attribute, with the exception of organizational and team climate. In the main category of symbolic attributes, sincerity completely dominated every other symbolic attribute. Innovativeness completely dominated every other symbolic attribute except sincerity.¹

4.3.2 | Differences between current and former employees

Given that employer reviews are provided by either current or former employees, we also evaluated whether our results differ between those two groups. First, we tested whether the mean favorability rating differed between current and former employees. Former ($M = 2.76$) and current employees ($M = 3.81$) differed significantly ($t(175,363) = 246.17$, $p < .001$) in terms of their favorability ratings. Next, we examined whether the dominance analysis yields different results for reviews disseminated by current versus former employees. We first fitted two cross-classified random effects models using solely reviews posted by current employees and solely reviews posted by former employees. Both models significantly reduced deviation compared to a null model ($p < .001$).

We then conducted a dominance analysis to compare the relative importance of the models' Level 1 predictors and determined the relative importance of each predictor. For current employees, personal content (1.32%) added more additional average contribution to the null model than impersonal content (0.10%), symbolic content (2.59%) added more additional average contribution to the null model than instrumental content (1.35%), and emotional content (1.35%) added more additional average contribution to the null model than cognitive content (0.12%). Regarding former employees, personal content (2.70%) added more additional average contribution to the null model than impersonal content (1.09%), symbolic content (3.84%) added more additional average contribution to the null model than instrumental content (2.05%), and emotional content (2.17%) added more additional average contribution to the null model than cognitive content (0.37%). In both groups, personal content completely dominated impersonal content, symbolic content completely dominated instrumental content, and emotional content completely dominated cognitive content. In sum, there were no differences in

the results for current versus former employees, thereby justifying treating these groups as homogeneous in our analysis.

5 | DISCUSSION

Due to the rapid rise of social media, a company's employer image is no longer exclusively defined, shaped, and controlled by the company itself but is also influenced by third parties outside of direct company control, including current employees, former employees, and customers (Castelló et al., 2016; Etter et al., 2019; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). A popular and systematic example of this shift is that of online employer reviews (Dineen et al., 2019), which constitute a specific type of web-based word-of-mouth (Evertz et al., 2021; Stockman, 2020). We are the first to scrutinize which content from open-ended comments goes into the key variable in such employer reviews, namely employers' favorability ratings. Our examination of approximately half a million online employer reviews leads to several important implications for theory and research which we discuss below.

5.1 | Implications for theory

Given that employer review websites are essentially social media platforms, we drew from the NMRF framework (Etter et al., 2019) to shed light on the content of employer reviews as reflections of how company insiders perceive their company's image as an employer. Moreover, since in prior research the favorability rating was purported to reflect different constructs, such as job and employer satisfaction, company reputation, and public affective evaluations (e.g., Landers et al., 2019; Querbach et al., 2022; Schaarschmidt et al., 2021; Sharkey et al., 2022), we used Lievens and Slaughter's (2016) categorization to locate this key variable in the conceptual employer branding space. Specifically, our findings imply that the favorability rating also reflects identity characteristics (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). In this vein, we, first, advance the literature by showing that symbolic trait attributions are more important than instrumental attributions in favorability ratings of employer reviews, whereas this is not the case in current employer image conceptualizations (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). The importance of symbolic traits for receiving a favorable rating can be understood in terms of self-expression and social identity motives (Highhouse et al., 2007). The link drawn by this study to the organizational identity literature is reasonable considering that the favorability ratings of employer reviews are created by organizational members (i.e., employees), who are central to organizational identity. Accordingly, this study suggests that the symbolic attributes mentioned in employer reviews might resemble the core, distinctive, and reasonably enduring features of an organization.

Second, our perspective challenges theoretical perspectives suggesting that employer image is primarily cognitively driven (Collins & Kanar, 2013; see also Lievens & Slaughter, 2016) by showing that emotional processing is more relevant for whether a company will

receive a favorable rating in employer reviews. As our findings highlight the role of emotional processing, they indicate that the favorability rating in employer reviews shares this conceptual characteristic with the affective component of identity (Ashforth et al., 2008, 2020; Edwards, 2005; Johnson et al., 2012; van Dick, 2001). As a related implication, our findings also suggest that theories on how companies may control their image and thus position themselves as attractive employers are incomplete (see Theurer et al., 2018), as such theories have thus far largely overlooked the role of emotionality in employer image management.

A third important contribution relates to the discrepancy between the prevalence of content characteristics in employer reviews and their role in receiving a favorable rating. When one reads employer reviews, one often gets the impression that people mostly complain about instrumental factors such as low pay, bad leadership, and low promotion opportunity rather than about companies' sincerity or innovativeness. The mean values in our study confirm the higher frequency of impersonal, instrumental, and cognitive content in employer reviews. However, importantly, although less frequently mentioned, it is the personal, symbolic, and emotional content that determine the favorability rating (i.e., how many "stars" the company gets at the end of the review). Apparently, there is a "rarity effect" in employer reviews wherein less frequent characteristics seem to determine whether a company will receive a favorable rating. This rarity effect speaks to the importance of differentiation and standing out in employer branding (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Moser et al., 2020; Tumasjan et al., 2020). We thus advance the literature by demonstrating that the prevalence of content dimensions (i.e., how often they are mentioned) on employer review websites does not imply that these dimensions determine the favorability rating. Thus, weighing these content dimensions and acting upon them merely based on their prevalence may be misleading. This is the case because, as our study shows, it is in fact the less prevalent content (i.e., symbolic, personal, and emotional content) that dominates employer reviews' favorability ratings. Thus, our study thereby uncovers a phenomenon that, if considered "naively," might lead to wrong conclusions.

Finally, we discovered that there is a hierarchy in the importance of content characteristics as determinants of the favorability of a company as presented in an employer review. Among the three important content characteristics (personal, symbolic, and emotional), symbolic content emerged as the single most important content characteristic, dominating personal and emotional content. In other words, companies' favorability as presented in employer reviews hinges predominantly on the traits and human qualities attributed to them in employer reviews. First-hand experiences and emotions then serve to support this key symbolic content.

5.2 | Implications for practice

Our study also offers practical implications. First, organizations may use our dictionary to analyze the content of their own and their

relevant competitors' employer reviews. With the proliferation of people and HR analytics in companies and the increasing significance of employer review platforms, our dictionary offers a valuable tool for analyzing their employer image online. Second, organizations should not be misguided merely by the mentioning frequency of the attributes in employer reviews when (re-)designing their employer branding strategies. Rather our findings imply that the favorability rating—which organizations often use as an indicator of their employer attractiveness—may also be strongly influenced by characteristics that are mentioned less frequently (i.e., symbolic, personal, and emotional content in our conceptualization). Thus, organizations need to develop a nuanced understanding of the content drivers of their favorability rating rather than jumping to conclusions based on a superficial view of the attribute frequency.

5.3 | Limitations

We acknowledge the following limitations of our study. First, we used dictionary-based CATA to analyze the content characteristics of employer reviews. Besides this approach, topic modeling is another popular approach for text analysis. A comparative study by Guo et al. (2016) concluded that topic modeling reveals more differentiated content details, whereas CATA permits more focused analysis of previously defined topics. As we intended to identify *a priori*, theoretically derived topics, CATA seemed best suited here. However, our CATA and results might have missed some content categories, as this limitation is inherent to the CATA method. Second, as our data came from the field, we do not know how many positive reviews were posted by current employees in an attempt by organizations to leverage (i.e., "game") these third-party sites to their benefit (Dineen et al., 2019). How might such reviews have affected our results? On the one hand, we found that the favorability ratings posted by current employees were significantly higher than those of former employees. It is possible that some of these current employees were asked by their companies to post positive reviews. On the other hand, our dominance hypotheses were supported for both current and former employees. Hence, the theoretically derived structural relationships between the review content characteristics and the favorability ratings seem to hold. Nonetheless, our findings suggest that we should be wary of the potentially inflated nature of favorability ratings given by current employees and that more research is needed in this domain.

Third, our database included more than half a million employer reviews, and our regressions were based on comparatively large sample sizes. Although large sample sizes are advantageous, one caveat is that even small effects might be significant. However, we qualified our effects in terms of practical effect sizes, thus demonstrating their meaningfulness.

Fourth, regarding our H3, it is possible that the emotions reported in employer reviews are not the emotions that the reviewer experiences in the situation of writing a review. Thus, writing the review may constitute a cognitive response to the reported emotion

rather than an emotional response. If so, our measure may have captured the cognitive response to an emotion rather than the emotion itself. As this limitation comes with the dictionary-based approach that we used, more research is needed to investigate this issue further. In the same vein, regarding H1, we acknowledge that impersonal pronouns do not always exclude personal content and vice versa. Although our dictionary-based assessment relied on prior research indicating that pronoun choice hints at the content's nature and the speaker's or writer's distance from it (Davis & Brock, 1975; Gunsch et al., 2000; Rude et al., 2004; Tackman et al., 2019; Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010), it is important to acknowledge that there are exceptions where personal pronouns appear in impersonal contexts and vice versa. To address this issue, future studies should also rely on other linguistic markers, such as active/passive voice and context, for a more accurate assessment.

5.4 | Directions for future research

Our study offers some intriguing avenues for future research. First, whereas we linked the employer review content categories to the employers' favorability rating, future researchers should investigate whether these content categories and the favorability rating also predict organizational attraction. So far, we only have evidence from experimental studies that employer reviews *can* affect applicant intentions, perceptions, and attitudes. Field-based evidence is needed to ensure that they actually *do* affect applicant attraction to companies. Similarly, future research should investigate whether the employer review content and the favorability rating influence the retention of current employees. As noted earlier, companies scrutinize employer reviews to cross-validate potential negative aspects found in them with reasons for leaving a company as gathered via exit interviews (Saini & Kaura, 2018).

Second, our results call for a better understanding of the role of emotions in employer branding. Whereas we found that emotions play an important role in the content of employer reviews, it is important to find out whether employers should also bring emotions into the mix for attracting applicants. Although emotions have been investigated extensively in the field of product branding, employer branding research has been lagging behind (Tumasjan et al., 2020). Thus, we should investigate the effectiveness of emotional employer information in employers' branding efforts. After all, emotions possess persuasive power to influence and change individuals' attitudes on a variety of topics (van Kleef et al., 2015).

Third, our study focuses on employer reviews as one type of TPE branding. However, it is key to investigate the relative effects of other types of TPE branding (e.g., media coverage, awards, word-of-mouth) in combination with employer reviews on key recruitment and retention outcomes. Relatedly, we need to investigate how job seekers integrate the (often discrepant) information from these different types of TPE branding. Thus, future research is needed to understand how the different sources of TPE are combined in job seekers' applications and current employees' decision to stay with their employer.

Fourth, we captured the judgment policy of the writers of the employer reviews. That is, we investigated what content categories they weigh more in their favorability rating. It would be fascinating to capture the policy of the readers in a similar fashion and examine whether and to what extent they value the same or different cues. Moreover, research should investigate application and retention decisions of readers of employer reviews to assess the relative importance of the reviews' contents and favorability for employer review readers.

Fifth, research in the field of product reviews has investigated how fake online reviews can be detected based on review content and style (e.g., Salminen et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2016). In this vein, we encourage future research to investigate the detection of fake employer reviews written by humans and algorithms using machine learning.

6 | CONCLUSION

Our study advances theory and empirical research on employer reviews. We focused on the relationship between content/style characteristics of open-ended comments and the employer's favorability rating. We analyzed approximately half a million employer reviews from Europe's largest employer review platform. Although impersonal, instrumental, and emotional content was more prevalent in employer reviews, we discovered that personal (vs. impersonal), symbolic (vs. instrumental), and emotional (vs. cognitive) content determines whether a more positive or more negative review is given. Critically, our study thus shows that first-hand experiences, symbolic traits, and emotionality play dominant roles in the favorability ratings of employer reviews.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from Kununu. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for this study. Data are available from the author(s) with the permission of Kununu.

ENDNOTE

¹ Tables with individual attributes' correlations, HLM, and dominance analysis results are available from the first author upon request.

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