



# One Size Fits All? Employer Branding in Different Contexts

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## Abstract

With employer branding (EB), businesses aim to align their organizational norms with the norms of their current and prospective employees, and they explicitly communicate about the firm's norms. Communication, however, carries different meanings depending on the context in which one operates. Also, the organizational norms may vary depending on the context, i.e., industry, different countries, and geographical context in which a firm operates. As such, the process of EB may be context-dependent, too. This study explores if and how EB is applied differently in different country and industry contexts. The analysis draws on a quantitative content analysis of 226 job vacancies targeted at highly educated graduates and professionals in IT, energy, and healthcare from the North of the Netherlands and comparable regions from Germany and Bulgaria. Our findings show that EB, as manifested in core values and distinctive characteristics, is not widely adopted in the vacancies we included in our analysis. When adopted, different values are emphasized depending on the context. General information and job-specific information are most frequent among all industries and countries. EB is a multidimensional concept with different dimensions used according to the context. The study's main implication is that companies need to be mindful of the context in which an EB strategy is used. A one-size-fits-all approach in EB is likely not the most effective. This is particularly relevant for multinationals that adopt a worldwide organizational brand.

**Keywords** Employer branding · Employer image · Job vacancies · Context · Content analysis

## Introduction

Employees are crucial for improving the competitive strength of organizations in the global economy (Tumasjan et al. 2020). Recent research emphasizes the need for a

strategic approach to recruitment communication to gain a competitive advantage in the labor market and reduce the gap in global talent deficits (Slavković et al. 2018; Bharadwaj and Yameen 2020). Employer branding (EB) is one of the strategies that has gained recent academic interest as it helps potential employees understand their future employers (Verčič and Čorić 2018). Firms use EB to align their organizational norms and values with prospective and current employees (Cable and Edwards 2004; Sharma and Tanwar 2023) by explicitly communicating about them externally and internally. The mutual EB feedback loop between the organization as a whole and the individual or groups of employees ensures that organizational norms and values are constantly contested and checked against the norms of the employees.

Similarly, current and prospective employees evaluate their norms and values in the context of the organizational ones. Therefore, EB is about communicating and nurturing the organizational culture with the intention of becoming an attractive employer for suitable employees. Since EB is value-laden, its implementation and effectiveness likely depend on the match between the context in which

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it is adopted and the way it is executed. The cultural context in which a business is embedded will influence the norms it adheres to (Hofstede 2001). Similarly, employees' responses to the same EB strategy may vary following cultures and languages. A shared national culture or language can strengthen the matches between organizations and employees (Ehrhart and Ziegert 2005). While spatial units (countries and regions) are arguably the most explicit contexts for shared cultures, norms, and language, there are also stark differences between industries (Maxwell and Knox 2009). Even though there are likely contextual differences in the adaptation, execution, and, consequently, effectiveness of EB, EB is typically portrayed as a uniform approach. Also, empirical studies on the actual use of EB are scarce. Therefore, this study explores how EB is applied in different industries and countries and, in this way, explores how EB is manifested in different contexts.

Few studies have explicitly addressed the role of context in how EB has been applied in different industries and countries. Insights on how EB is applied in different cultures are marginal (Alniaçik et al. 2014), varying from literature reviews on EB within an international context (Špoljarić and Došen 2023) or presenting evidence from only one country (Hoye et al. 2013; Sivertzen et al. 2013; Purusottama and Ardianto 2019). These studies take a potential employee's perspective, examining which values are essential to job seekers rather than how EB is manifested in a particular culture. Studies on EB in different industries focus primarily on services, hospitality, or retail industries (Punjaisri and Wilson 2011; Wang and Tsai 2014; Wu et al. 2018; Dabirian et al. 2019). The contribution of our study is twofold: first, it adds empirically to existent theoretical work on EB in responsible recruitment communication tailored to the specific context; second, it explores which specific EB cues are used in different contexts.

Specifically, we address the following research question: *In what ways does the application of EB differ across national and industry contexts?*

If there are differences, we look for what type of differences exist and come to an overview of different approaches used, depending on the industry or country. We focus on EB in job vacancies in the three leading industries in the North of the Netherlands—IT, energy, and healthcare - to explore differences between industries and compare these with similar regions in the rest of Europe to examine different manifestations of EB among national cultures.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: we start by presenting the central elements of the theoretical approach; then, we discuss the methodology and present the results on job vacancies in different industries and countries. Lastly, we provide reflections on the results and their contributions.

## Theoretical Background

### Employer Branding Defined

EB is based on the conviction that the employer organization can be seen as a “brand.” Employer brands help (potential) employees differentiate an employer from its competitors (Bustamante and Brenninger 2014). Ambler and Barrow (1996, p. 187) define the concept as: “the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company.” Part of the literature takes a linear approach to EB by looking at it as a process of building the organization's unique employer image to be perceived positively by potential employees (Backhaus and Tikoo 2004; Mihalcea 2017). This stream has formed a more functionalistic perspective towards EB, which is concerned with transmitting values to employees as a target audience.

More recently, another stream of EB presents a more dynamic perspective of relationship management with employees, allowing for alignment between the identifiable identity of the organization with its core values and corporate culture and the authentic employer image associated with this identity (Jain and Bhatt 2015; Lievens and Slaughter 2016). This alignment occurs as part of a relationship management process between the organization and its employees, in which the boundaries between internal and external stakeholders blur (Andersen et al. 2013). It is in this more dynamic view that the contextual perspective on EB is brought in. The focus lies on incorporating the organization into the current context in which it operates, emphasizing the necessity of long-term relationships with employees as part of a particular context (Aggerholm et al. 2011; App et al. 2012; Kolesnicov 2018). EB then needs to be reevaluated constantly to fit the current context. The employee-centric approach means that the benefits sought may vary depending on the social and cultural characteristics of the context or that the type of industry may condition the type of benefits sought. For example, in national cultures where consensus, equality, and solidarity are essential, applicants may seek forms of value in their employer other than those in countries where these values are not a priority. Similarly, in industries with high demand for skills, employees may opt for different values compared to other industries (Ronda et al. 2018). Therefore, how EB is practiced in different contexts may differ as employers can more effectively align their organizational values with prospective employees.



## EB Dimensions

EB can be seen as a multidimensional construct as benefits identified with the employer are numerous. There have been previous attempts in literature to identify dimensions that constitute EB. In line with the long-term approach to EB, Collins and Stevens (2002) suggest that “general attitudes” towards the company, as well as “specific job attributes,” are the two most essential dimensions constituting EB. From the studies acknowledging general attitudes towards the employer, Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) are among the first to provide a framework in which EB includes elements of corporate identity and culture, which are translated into attributes forming the employer value proposition (EVP). The EVP features the unique selling point of an employer communicated to the candidates (Younis and Hammad 2021). This research is consistent with literature suggesting that EB should be an integrated process within the organization (Gilani 2019), which results in positive outcomes for corporate branding (Verčič and Čorić 2018), recruitment (Gatewood et al. 1993; Sommer et al. 2016) and organizational culture and employee retention (Ind 1997). EB is rooted in the identity, communicated through core values, and represents organizational culture. Core values, also known as unique characteristics, make the employer brand as they are reflected in the corporate culture and expressed in living the brand by the behavior of its members (Balmer and Greyser 2006). This makes corporate identity and culture an indispensable part of EB. Corporate culture with both its visible and latent elements, is the set of shared beliefs and practices within the company, shaping how employees interact and how business is conducted (Cornelissen and Elving 2003). A strong corporate culture influences corporate identity and can drive both reputation and image. For example, a positive corporate culture often leads to a strong reputation if it reflects positively in business outcomes and customer relations.

Corporate identity, reputation, and image are three interconnected concepts in business studies, but they have distinct meanings. Corporate identity refers to the company's self-perception, encompassing its values, mission, vision, and internal attributes. It is essentially how a company defines itself, including the visual elements (logos, slogans) and behaviors representing the organization (Riel and Balmer 1997; Cornelissen and Elving 2003; Pérez and Bosque 2014). Corporate reputation refers to the collective perceptions of its stakeholders over time (Cornelissen 2020). It is built on the history of the company's actions, its trustworthiness, and the degree to which it meets stakeholder expectations. Reputation is earned through consistent performance, reflects the credibility of the company in the marketplace, and serves as a reservoir of goodwill in times

of crisis (Jones et al. 2000). Corporate image, on the other hand, is more immediate and refers to the current perception of the company by various stakeholders. It is shaped by marketing efforts, media portrayals, and customer experiences. While image can change relatively quickly, reputation tends to build or erode over a longer period. This means that corporate reputation and corporate image both represent aggregate views of various external and internal stakeholders (financial, customers, suppliers, governments, communities), converging many organizational landscapes (Fombrun and Riel 2003). Therefore, distinguishing reputation and image among different stakeholder groups is essential in order to be able to isolate specific perceptions held in the short- or long-run. Internally, the reputation is shaped by “the sense-making experiences of employees” (Riel and Fombrun 2007, p. 57). Following a similar logic for the distinction between corporate image and employer image, the employer image represents the perceptions (potential) employees hold of their employer. Closely related to reputation and image, the company's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities are another dimension constituting the general attitudes of (potential) employees. A company's efforts to have a positive impact on the environment, consumers, employees, and communities can serve as a signal to potential employees about the company's working conditions and what the organization's function in society is with regard to social and environmental issues (Lis 2018). As such, it can positively impact corporate reputation (Eberle et al. 2013) and serve as a windshield for the organization in times of crisis (Vanhamme et al. 2014, Coombs 2017).

Berthon et al. (2005) relate the specific attributes to the perception of benefits that an employer brings to an employee—the more attractive the benefits, the greater the employer's attractiveness. EB in job vacancies creates the foundation for the perception of employer benefits and, therefore, the foundation for the match between the employer and potential employees (Mihalcea 2017). Table 1 summarizes the most prominent EB dimensions from the literature. Based on the above studies, we argue that employees' EB is shaped based on dimensions such as corporate identity, corporate culture, corporate image and reputation, and CSR (Hoppe et al. 2022), next to specific job attributes. Therefore, these dimensions should be considered part of the EB strategy to achieve a maximal effect in EB communication.

## EB in Different Contexts

Given contextual factors ranging from national culture to living contexts, job seekers have different values, needs, and priorities. Research on EB in different contexts has mainly focused on different industries and countries. It reveals a complex and reciprocal relationship between the employer brand and the context (Vaijayanthi et al. 2011; Landqvist



**Table 1** EB dimensions

Dimension	Components	Literature
Corporate Identity	Core values, mission, vision (inside out)	Riel and Balmer (1997); Backhaus and Tikoo (2004); Balmer and Greyser (2006); Whetten (2006); Pérez and Bosque (2014); Cornelissen (2020)
Corporate Culture	Shared values, behavior, communication	Cornelissen and Elving (2003)
Corporate Image/Reputation	Image (outside in), recall, affective evaluation	Fombrun and Riel (2003); Riel and Fombrun (2007); Jain and Bhatt (2015); Lievens and Slaughter (2016); Biswas and Suar (2016)
Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)	Company purpose, what is it adding to society, ESG	Vanhamme et al. (2014); Eberle et al. (2013); Biswas and Suar (2016); Jones et al. (2017); Lis (2018); Verčič and Čorić (2018); Hoppe et al. (2022)
USP/uniqueness	Unique selling point, Employer Value Proposition	Younis and Hammad (2021)
Development value	Recognition, career enhancement	Berthon et al. (2005)
Social value	Good team atmosphere, fun working environment	Berthon et al. (2005); Devendorf and Highhouse 2008
Application value	Apply knowledge, teach others	Berthon et al. (2005)
Economic value	Salary, compensation, job security	Berthon et al. (2005); Gilani and Cunningham (2017)
Interest value	Exciting work environment, novel work practices make use of its employee's creativity to produce high-quality, innovative products and services	Berthon et al. (2005)

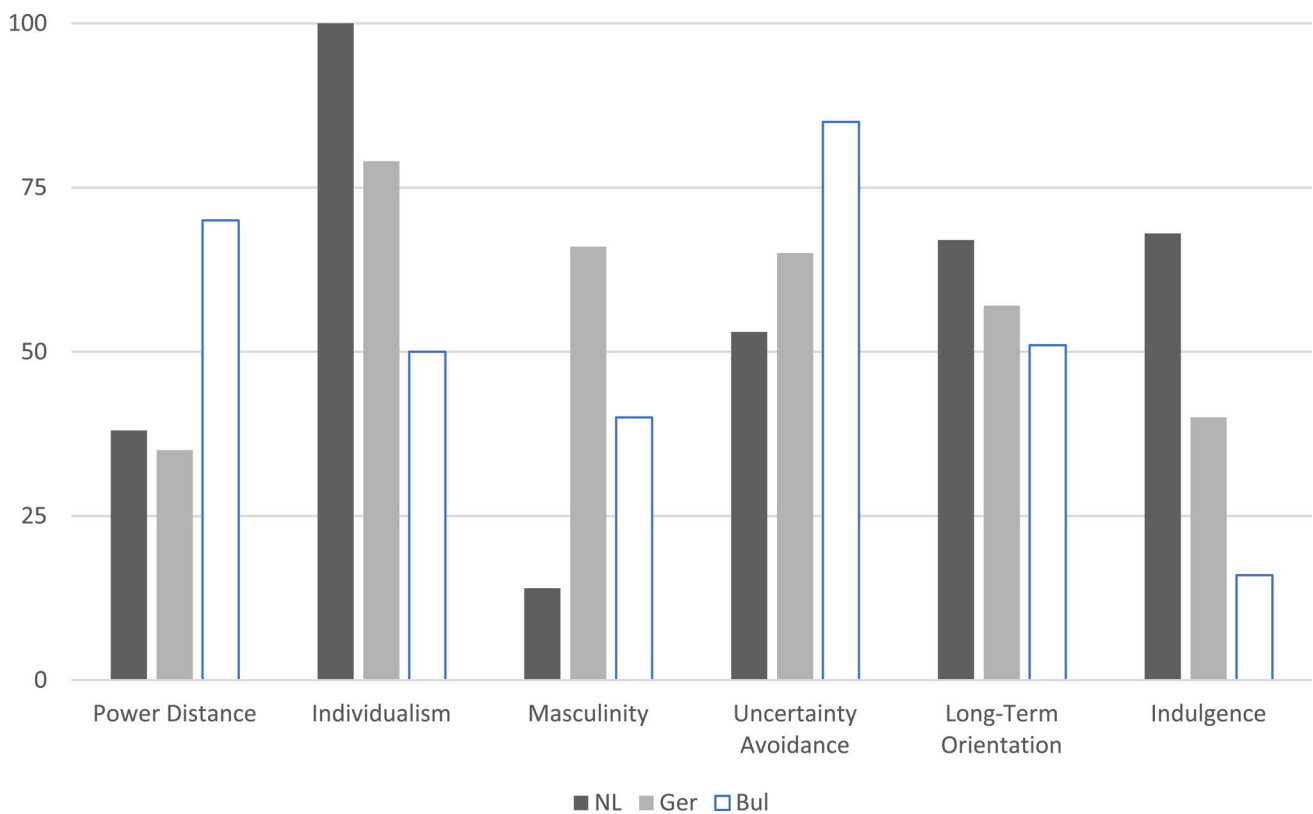
2018). Different contexts become relevant in crafting EB approaches as cultures, norms, and values are reproduced in communities bound on different grounds. First, we consider countries and second, industries as possible communities that share norms and values and, with that, also EB strategies.

Cultural aspects that vary across countries play a significant role in EB, with studies showing a relationship between cultural assumptions and factors influencing employment choices (Werenowska and Drab 2016). Most empirical studies address the perception of different dimensions of EB in different cultures (Alniaçik et al. 2014; Sivertzen et al. 2013; Eger et al. 2019) or the impact of national culture on job seekers' intentions (Baum and Kabst 2013; Luchtenveld 2014). The latter study surveyed engineering students from Europe and Asia–Pacific and found that respondents in different countries valued work-life balance, economic value, and task attractiveness differently. Similarly, Caligiuri et al. (2010) found evidence for cross-cultural values (i.e., collectivism and individualism) as determinants of the importance of a particular EB strategy. A comparison between Latvia and Turkey on Berthon et al. (2005)'s dimensions by Alniaçik et al. (2014) revealed significant differences between the two countries. Participants in Turkey perceive dimensions such as “humanitarian organization” and “opportunity to teach others” as being more critical than Latvian respondents. On the other hand, “good promotion opportunities” and “above

average basic salary” are the items that scored similarly in both cultures.

Hofstede (2001)'s cultural dimensions have been highly regarded to be the most relevant compared to other equivalent cultural models, such as Hall and Hall's (1990) or Trompenaar's (1993) cultural frameworks, for providing a systematic approach for measuring and comparing cultural differences and understanding value sets and behaviors accordingly (Nguyen 2015). The cultural model includes six dimensions of national cultures: power distance, individualism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, long-term orientation, and indulgence (Hofstede 1980). This model has a direct implication for the use of EB strategies in a particular cultural context. For example, Hofstede (2001) indicates that cultures with a high score in masculinity are a society that considers success a dominant value for describing the company's reputation. Applied to EB, it can be said that job applicants from a masculine society would consider benefits and achievement important when searching for a job (Berthon et al. 2005). Individualism is a cultural factor describing the level of independence and individual ambitions over the group's goals. Subsequently, those motivated to answer how and to what extent an organization adjusts its EB approach to fit the needs of (potential) employees' context would expect that individual goals and expectations to be consulted as an employee would be dominant in individualistic societies.





**Fig. 1** Hofstede's cultural dimensions for the Netherlands, Germany and Bulgaria. Source: <https://www.theculturefactor.com/country-comparison-tool?countries=bulgaria%2Cgermany%2Cnetherlands>. *Description of the Dimensions:* Power Distance (PDI): Measures the extent to which less powerful members of organizations accept that power is distributed unequally. Bulgaria has a high PDI, indicating a more hierarchical society compared to the Netherlands and Germany. Individualism (IDV): This dimension looks at the degree of interdependence among members of society. The Netherlands and Germany are more individualistic, while Bulgaria leans towards collectivism. Masculinity (MAS): Masculinity refers to a society's preference for

achievement, heroism, and material rewards. Germany scores high, showing a more competitive society, while the Netherlands has a lower score, emphasizing quality of life. Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI): Reflects how comfortable a culture is with ambiguity and uncertainty. Bulgaria ranks the highest, indicating a strong preference for rules and structure. Long-Term Orientation (LTO): This dimension considers the cultural focus on future rewards, perseverance, and adaptability. All three countries score fairly high, with the Netherlands ranking highest. Indulgence (IVR): Relates to the degree of freedom in fulfilling human desires. The Netherlands scores highest, reflecting a more indulgent society

The Netherlands, Germany and Bulgaria are three different cultural contexts that present an opportunity to study EB. Figure 1 illustrates an overview of Dutch, German, and Bulgarian culture through the lens of Hofstede Insights (2023). What stands out is the Netherlands' highest score on the individualism dimension and the lowest score on masculinity compared to Germany and Bulgaria, emphasizing quality of life and individual opinion. Job seekers in the Netherlands would prioritize a work atmosphere with a good work-life balance, consensus and exhibit an open attitude to their impulses as having fun on the job (Nguyen 2015). Conversely, Bulgaria has the highest power distance and uncertainty avoidance scores compared to Germany and the Netherlands, making it a more hierarchical society with a preference for structure. Bulgaria's lowest score on individualism make it a more collectivistic culture. Team activities and engagement with the team would naturally be

emphasized in such a context. Germany scores the highest on masculinity, showing a more competitive society with a focus on achievement and rewards. Therefore, candidates from a masculine society would consider leadership, benefits, and development opportunities important when searching for a job.

Drawing on cultural theories, Lewis (2018) suggests that one can make observations for specific industries and work situations and draw behavioral patterns. Many individuals deviate from national types depending on the work they do. For example, more technical industries, such as IT and energy, would be more inclined to stick to facts or plan ahead, whereas healthcare would be more responsive to the specific situation at hand.

Regarding the application of EB in different industries, Knox and Freeman (2006) provide evidence that in service industries, the employer image needs consistency inside





and outside the organization for the EB strategies to be effective. Research in hospitality industries reveals that hospitalities are often associated with low-wage, low-skill, and antisocial working times characteristics. Because of that, EB is used as a vehicle to contribute to the overall reputation improvement of these industries (Sciukauske 2020). Dabirian et al. (2019) identify eight value propositions for successful employer branding in the IT industry, as employees perceive. The value propositions are based on Berthon et al. (2005) five dimensions (“development-, “social-, “application-, “economic-, “and “interest value”) and add dimensions of “management value,” “work-life balance,” and “overall brand image,” relevant specifically to IT industries. For one, employees' identification with the employer brand improves service delivery. At the same time, the interplay between EB and internal branding collectively forms the core values of service organization. The energy sector, encompassing oil, gas, and renewable energy, is distinct in its focus on sustainability (Kossivi et al. 2016), career development and long-term job stability (Herriot and Pemberton 1997). While the IT industry emphasizes innovation and flexibility, energy companies often focus on job security, career stability, and the opportunity to contribute to global energy solutions. The healthcare sector, on the other hand, faces unique challenges in many cultural settings. One of the most significant challenges is the high turnover and burnout rates among healthcare professionals (Garnett et al. 2023). In this context, employers focus on employee well-being and the emotional rewards of working in healthcare (Koch-Rogge and Westermann 2021).

Although limited, these studies underpin the industry-specific nature of EB and its potential impact on organizational performance. Because these are comparative studies over specific industries, they show the relevance of certain aspects in EB but not that some aspects are more important than others. The congruence between EB and the industry has been highlighted, calling for more empirical evidence on how EB is applied in various industries (Syal 2021).

Although the findings of such studies cannot be generalized, they suggest that depending on the industry or cultural context, different significance is assigned to different dimensions of EB. The interplay between industry-specific demands and the cultural nuances necessitates a multifaceted approach. Specifically, job vacancies are vital to creating an impression of organizations as employers in a particular context (Cober et al. 2000).

In the next section, we present the study's set-up and methodology, emphasizing the connection between cultures and industries. We consider different industries within the same cultural setting and the same industry within different countries as a basis for comparison.

## Empirical Approach

### Method and Set-up

For our empirical strategy, we rely on online job vacancy texts from the Netherlands, Germany, and Bulgaria from companies in three industries: IT, energy, and healthcare. We assess the texts for elements of EB, allowing us to compare the use and manifestations of EB across different contexts. Job vacancies are the first contact point between employees and employers, helping organizations to create an impression of the company's aims, norms, and values (Oltarzhevskiy 2019). As such, they are an essential conduit through which organization manifests their EB strategy. Indeed, Reeves et al. (2013) suggest that information provided in online job vacancies during recruitment can raise awareness of the employer brand and inform and engage with potential hires during their application decision-making process. Vacancy texts are not the only way to convey EB, but they are typically part of the strategy and should, as such, demonstrate the EB strategy of a company. The North of the Netherlands, North of Germany, and Bulgaria balance a similar socio-economic context (somewhat peripheral economies) and challenges (shortage of skilled workers), giving them the same urgency for EB. At the same time, they have different cultures and ways of communicating as discussed in the theoretical background (Hofstede Insights 2023). The industries are different with respect to the nature of the work done and the employees' skills and specializations that they need. Regarding the same cultural setting (North of the Netherlands), IT, energy, and healthcare are the three leading industries and experience shortages in talented employees. Moreover, these industries focus on different main transitions that the North of the Netherlands sees as strategic aims for the coming years: from fossil to sustainable energy, from care to (positive) health, and from analog to digital (SNN 2020).

Looking at the same industry but different countries, talent in IT in the North of the Netherlands and Bulgaria is insufficient, and companies lack qualified employees (Dimitrova and Vladov 2017). IT sectors are attractive to highly educated employees, the sectors are booming, and leading universities with IT talent are in the cities of Groningen in the North of the Netherlands and Sofia in Bulgaria. In this respect, IT industries in both Sofia and Groningen provide a logical base for comparison, considering the different cultural contexts and similarities in the industry characteristics. In terms of the same industries in two different countries, healthcare and energy in the North of Germany and the North of the Netherlands are also a logical base for comparison because they share similarities



**Table 2** Two-dimensional set-up

Country/Industry	Energy	IT	Healthcare
North of Netherlands	X	X	X
Bulgaria		X	
North of Germany	X		X

on an industry level and, at the same time, differ culturally. Regarding similarities in both countries, energy companies are attractive to highly educated professionals because they offer challenging tasks, sustainable viability, a good working environment, and development opportunities (Beck 2008). However, how organizations emphasize these aspects may differ in Germany and the Netherlands. Although an interesting comparison can be provided for IT with Bulgaria, energy, and healthcare in Bulgaria follow quite a different development pattern due to the health system and energy reforms to deliver appropriate services to all layers of the population (OECD 2022). These countries were also chosen because of the fact that the opportunity occurred for more practical reasons. We needed at least two native speakers of Dutch, German, and Bulgarian language, and we had the opportunity.

This gives a basis to compare: (1) the way EB is applied in different industries within the same cultural setting, e.g., IT, energy, and healthcare in the North of the Netherlands; (2) the manifestation of EB in different countries within the same industry: IT in Bulgaria and the North of the Netherlands; energy and healthcare in the North of the Netherlands and the North of Germany. Thus, we follow a two-dimensional set-up presented in Table 2. First, we study if and how EB is used differently in three industries: IT, energy, and healthcare. Second, we compare if and how EB is used differently in two countries within each industry.

We rely on quantitative content analysis (Saunders et al. 2016) to analyze the vacancy texts and extract and qualify the manifestations of EB. It provides a structured way of examining a typically open-ended text by classifying it with the application of a coding scheme (Rose et al. 2016). In this way, patterns, relationships, trends, and shifts can be observed in the data related to the research topic.

## Data Collection and Sources

To identify and select job vacancies, first, the period was defined from September 1 until October 15, 2021. Second, to explore and refine relevant job vacancies, the criteria we used were a sector, country (region), education, e.g., Bachelor and/or Master level, contract form, e.g., full-time and part-time, number of hours, and experience level, e.g., up to 3 years for recent graduates. Relevant vacancies were considered based on these criteria.

Data for the Dutch labor market were collected from Indeed.nl and LinkedIn. Indeed.nl is the market leader within the Dutch labor market in 2021: more than half of active jobseekers (54%) use the platform, followed by LinkedIn (26%). Whereas Indeed.nl is used by all types of education and experience levels, LinkedIn is predominantly used by highly educated professionals (Intelligence Group 2021). The collection of Bulgarian vacancies was performed on the website Jobs.bg. According to a ranking in 2021, this website is the leading platform for job search and employment (Similar Web 2021). Additionally, LinkedIn was the other source of job vacancies in the Bulgarian IT sector because it is considered one of the most popular platforms among applicants (Krastev 2021). For Germany, we used LinkedIn and indeed.de, as well as the company websites of healthcare organizations. In this way, we had comparable and reliable sources for all three countries. The selected vacancies were from different companies or health institutions.

To compose a valid and varied sample of vacancies, we performed systematic randomization for the final set of vacancies, choosing every 140th vacancy from the pool of vacancies, ensuring we had an equal number in each country and per industry.

Following the above selection procedure, we identified 226 vacancies across the three regions and industries (see Table 3). We collected 113 Dutch online vacancies targeting highly educated graduates and professionals in the three different industries, namely IT (37), energy (26), and healthcare (50), and 113 vacancies in total from comparable regions in Bulgaria (IT, 37) and Germany (energy, 26; healthcare, 50).

## Coding

In the next step, the vacancy texts were examined for EB elements. For this, the texts were divided among four native-speaking coders, with each coder also analyzing a portion of another coder's selection to ensure the 4-eye principle. The 4-eye principle is an activity, in this case, coding, performed by at least two people to increase accuracy and transparency. Analyzing half of the data twice allowed us to test whether the different coders could verify the data similarly. In the end, an independent coder was hired to code all vacancies again to ensure the reliability of the analysis. This led to an intercoder reliability of 92%.

**Table 3** Vacancies overview  $N=226$ ,  $N$ =number of vacancies

Country/Industry	Energy	IT	Healthcare	Total
The North of the Netherlands	26	37	50	113
Bulgaria		37		37
The North of Germany	26		50	76
Total	52	74	100	226



The coding scheme followed by the coders was based on EB dimensions identified in previous studies (see also Table 1). Then, we applied emergent coding (Stemler 2001) to compose the final codes for analyzing the vacancies. Emergent coding involves deriving codes from the data itself to compose the final codes for analyzing the vacancies. We first randomly selected 20 vacancies from each industry from the initially selected set, as explained in the previous section, to identify essential descriptors of corporate information from the EB dimensions, which resulted in the initial coding scheme. The coding was conducted following a two-level procedure in Atlas.ti. The first level included yes/no questions on the organization (following the dimensions in Table 1), e.g., “Does the job vacancy discuss organizational values?” “Does the job vacancy discuss mission?”, “... vision?” The analysis aimed to measure the occurrences of the first-level codes. The goal of performing the second level of coding was to verify and upgrade the quotations from the first coding based on what is mentioned and how it is talked about. For example, “feeling at home” and “driven employees bringing impact” are part of the corporate culture, and “leader in the industry” and “growing” are part of the image. For this purpose, the text of each vacancy was revisited, and sub-codes were added or removed in Atlas.ti. In this way, more details of EB content were identified and confirmed.

See Table 4 for our final coding scheme. The analysis contained frequency counts according to the coding scheme.

## Results

This section first provides a general overview of how organizations communicate in job vacancies and whether they use EB. It then compares how EB elements are used across contexts.

### General Description of Vacancies Across Countries and Industries

Regarding the general description of the vacancies, on average, Dutch vacancies are longer than those in Bulgaria and Germany. The Netherlands tends to use more words

for information in job vacancies. Within the same cultural context (North of the Netherlands), healthcare vacancies are the longest (678), followed by IT (662) and energy (590). See Fig. 2. The differences are mainly found in the lengths of the texts of the German and Dutch vacancies. The Dutch texts are twice or even triple the size of a German vacancy. For example, the vacancy text of a “Physician researcher for a Ph.D. trajectory” had 988 words, compared to a vacancy from the Klinikum “Nursing scientist” with 284 words. German vacancies save space by not mentioning the salaries and, most of the time, the education level. Furthermore, a communicated USP is the option of the Klinikum to work in the hospital for a few days to get to know the environment: ‘Die Möglichkeit einer vorherigen Hospitation, um das Klinikum Oldenburg als Arbeitgeber kennen zu lernen.’ On the other hand, the Dutch vacancies include department information, elaboration on partnerships, and USPs to reinstate their identity and image. However, this is done with emphasis on procedures and not consistently enough, and it lacks a compact company signature at the start of the vacancies.

Looking at the specific information used, Fig. 3 presents the distribution of different types of information within the vacancy texts. Zooming into the text, it shows how vacancies are built up in terms of how they talk about general information, job information, key skills required, offers, or miscellaneous/additional information (contact, procedure, etc.). General administrative information is most prominent among all countries and industries, followed by job-specific information. We see an industry effect rather than country differences. Regardless of the country, we see more general and less job information in healthcare than in energy and IT. In energy, little is written about the company, and the focus is more on information on the job. Offer and key skills required are roughly the same across all groups, countries, and industries. Together, they account for approximately 30%. Usually, these include basic information and bullet point lists. Differences are seen in the general information and job information. As the general information includes a description of the organization, it serves as a first indication of EB.

**Table 4** Coding scheme

Coding level 1	Descriptors level 2 coding
Identity	Core values, mission, vision, characteristics, history
Corporate culture	Work environment, team, norms, benefits = material benefits + safety and inclusion
Image/reputation	Performance/success, reputation (outside in)
USP/uniqueness	Distinctive characteristics, employer value proposition
Training & Development	Training opportunity, professional development
CSR	Ethical, environmental responsibility





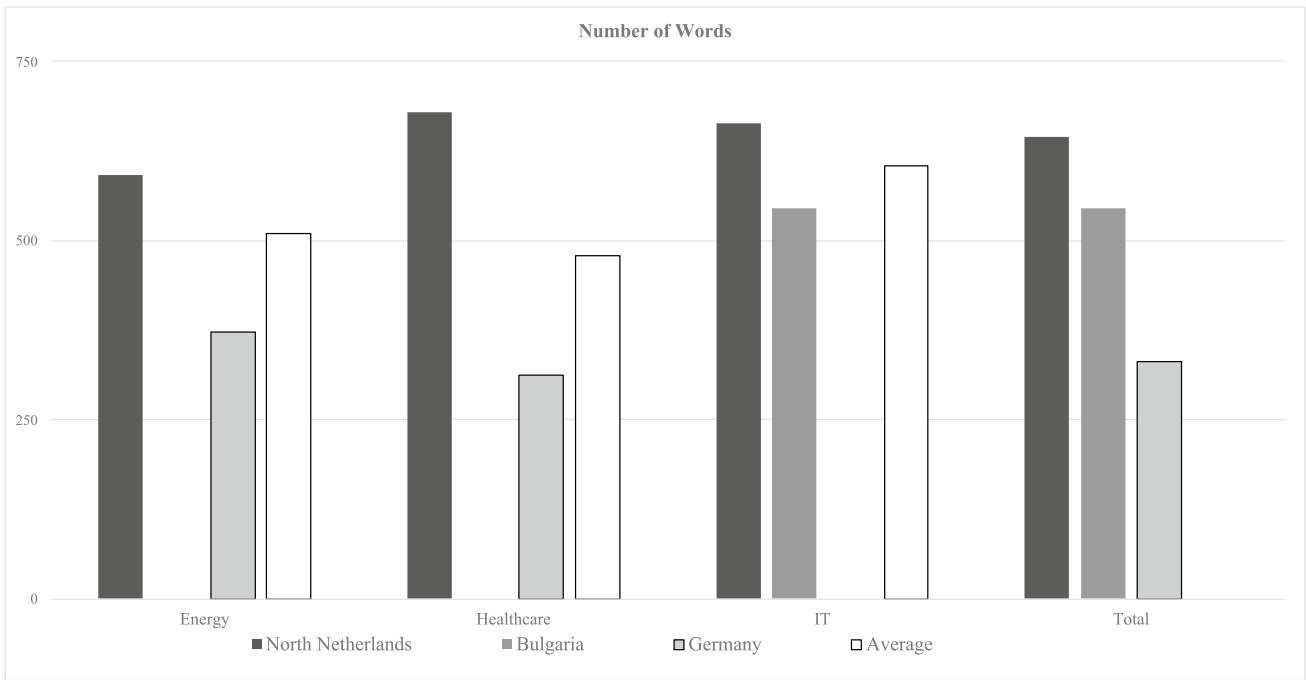


Fig. 2 Length of vacancies in total number of words

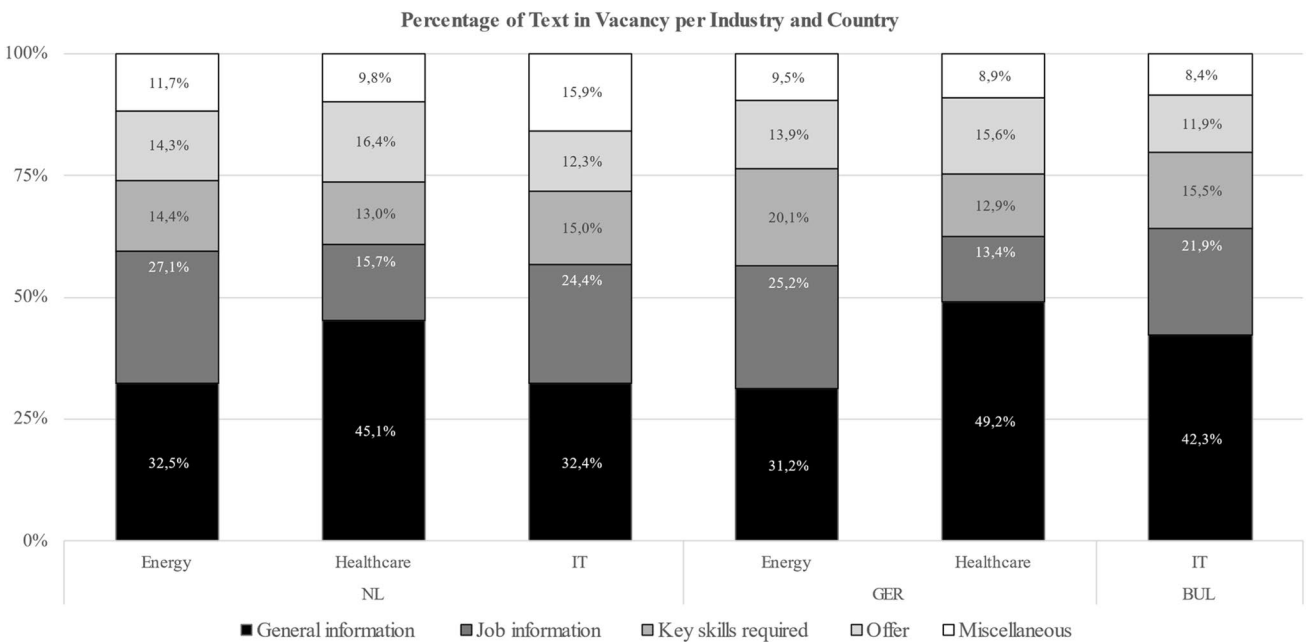


Fig. 3 Percentage of text in vacancy per country and industry

The coding shows that EB content is included in all three industries and countries. All vacancies include at least one element of EB. It then becomes relevant to explore whether there are differences in the intensity of the use of EB cues

across the vacancies. Table 5 summarizes the average number of EB labels across industries and countries.

There are differences in patterns between countries and sectors. On average, the intensity of EB use in the Netherlands is higher than in Bulgaria and Germany. Energy has more code manifestations than healthcare and IT.



**Table 5** Average EB code counts per country and industry

Country/Industry	Energy	IT	Healthcare
The North of the Netherlands	28	22	17
Bulgaria		12	
The North of Germany	10		5
Average	19	17	11

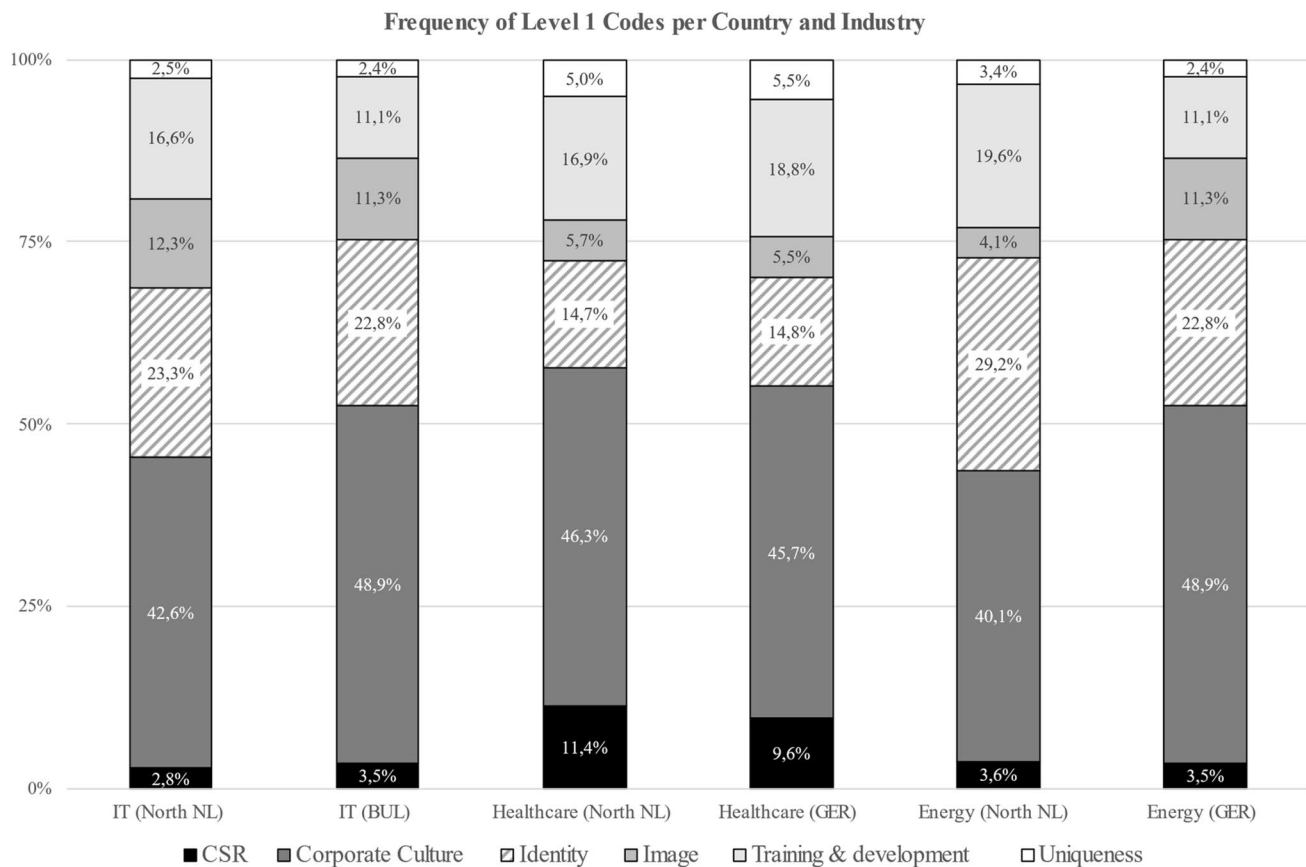
### Use of EB Cues Across Contexts

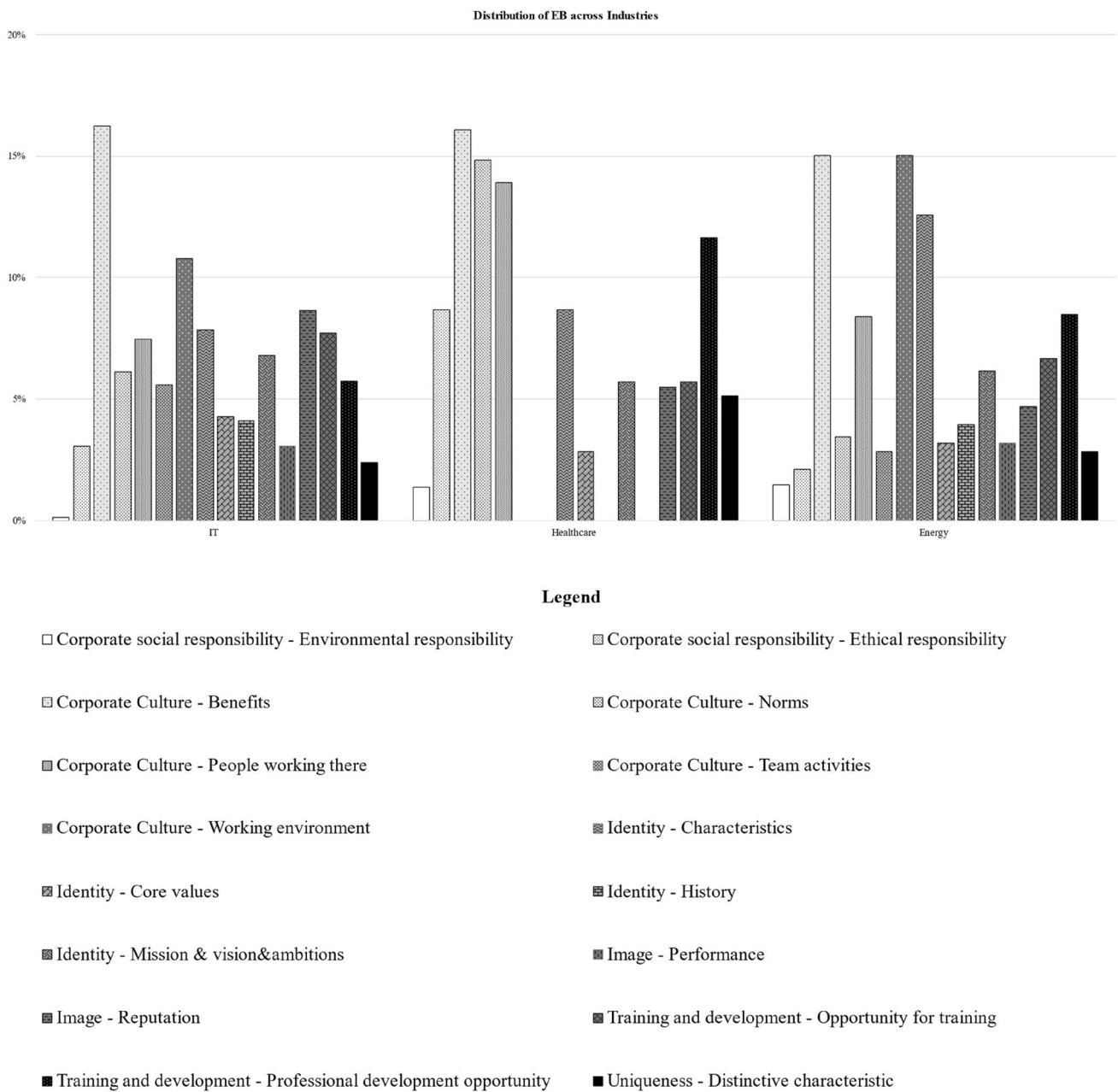
Given that organizations use EB differently in different countries and industries, Fig. 4 provides an overview of how level 1 codes are applied differently per country and industry.

The pattern of EB use among countries is roughly the same. When organizations talk about EB in vacancies, they talk primarily about “corporate culture” and “identity” and the least about “uniqueness.” However, companies in the North of the Netherlands seem less inclined to refer to “corporate culture” and “image” in the vacancies relative to Germany and Bulgaria. They seem to be underselling, relatively speaking, these aspects of EB.

The differences across industries seem more prominent compared to countries, with Energy and IT more attuned to “identity” and “image” and health more to “CSR.” To explain these differences, we zoom into the specific EB cues as represented by the sub-codes on level 2.

Figure 5 compares EB displays used across industry contexts in all countries. Regarding sub-codes, “environmental responsibility” is the least cited code across all industries, followed by “core values.” The top “corporate culture” elements are “benefits” for IT and healthcare and “benefits” and “working environment” for energy. The most commonly used characteristics within “corporate culture” are “collaborative,” “enthusiastic,” “independence and challenge,” “innovative,” and “result-oriented.” In terms of differences between industries, “benefits” (“transport allowance”), “norms” (“honest,” “involved”), and “people working there” (“fun and pleasant colleagues”) are the most frequently mentioned sub-codes of “corporate culture” in healthcare and “informal,” “safe and responsible” in terms of “working environment” in energy. IT is leading in the occurrence of the code “reputation” as part of “image” (“leader in the industry,” “growing”) and “opportunity for training” as part of “training and development.” In healthcare, “professional

**Fig. 4** Comparison of frequency of level 1 codes per country and industry



**Fig. 5** Distribution of codes in IT, energy and healthcare

development” is most commonly mentioned. In terms of “CSR” in healthcare, “CSR” is mainly represented by “ethical responsibility” compared to energy and IT. “Distinctive characteristics” score the highest in healthcare as opposed to IT. In terms of “identity,” energy scores the highest in “characteristics,” and for healthcare, we observe missing values for “core values” and “history,” which makes healthcare the least attuned towards “identity.”

Figure 6 allows for a comparison of the breakdown of EB elements across countries. The code group “corporate culture” occurred the most among the vacancies of

all countries. “Benefits” was most mentioned in all three countries. The most mentioned “benefit” in the Bulgarian vacancies was “additional insurance,” followed by “sport and wellness” benefits. On the contrary, these “benefits” did not appear significantly in the Dutch and German vacancies. Benefits related to transportation had the most considerable frequency in the Dutch vacancies. This signifies that these elements are used to position the EB in Bulgaria and the Netherlands, respectively. “Environmental responsibility” was mentioned the least in all three countries. There were zero “environmental responsibility”



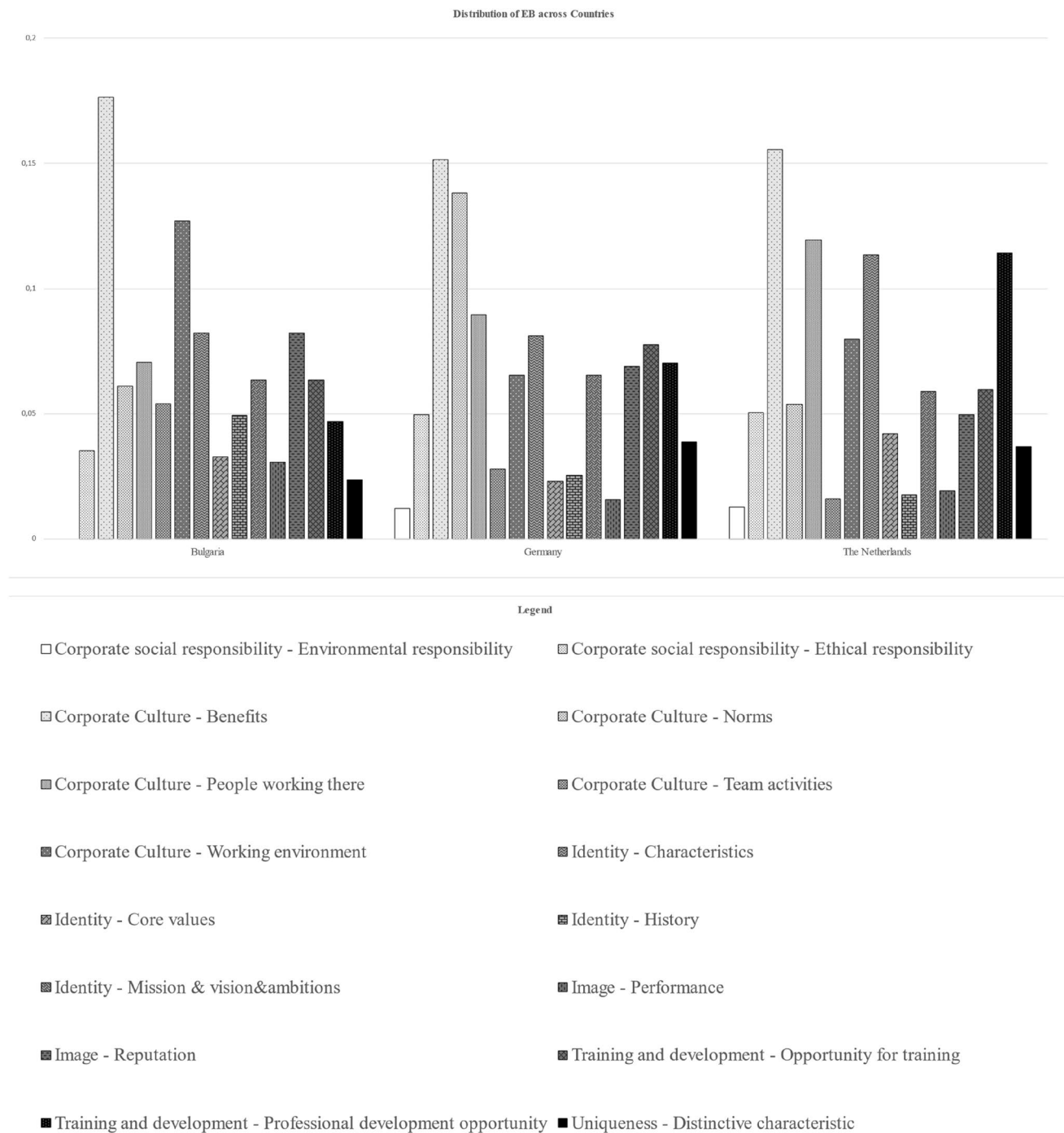


Fig. 6 Distribution of codes in Bulgaria, Germany and the Netherlands

occurrences in the Bulgarian vacancies, and “ethical responsibility” appeared the least. “Ethical responsibility,” on the other hand, appeared to be similar in the Dutch and German vacancies (5%). “Distinctive characteristics” or phrases with a “unique selling point” were coded the least in Bulgarian vacancies. Phrases that describe the “working environment” appear second in Bulgaria,

“norms” in Germany, and “People working there” in the Netherlands. “Core values” and “history” were the least mentioned “identity” codes in all countries. Regarding “image,” companies in the North of the Netherlands are less inclined to refer to “reputation.” German vacancies contained terms that can be valuable in attracting young talents: “everyone is welcome,” “flexible working time,”



“ambition,” “innovative company,” “modern,” and “sustainable employees make an impact.”

## Discussion and Conclusions

This study aimed to determine if and how EB is applied differently in vacancy texts across national and industry contexts. The findings show differences among industries and countries within the universe of codes used. Specifically, EB is used in vacancies in all countries and industries, with industry differences being more pronounced than country differences. On average, the Dutch vacancies are longer, and the intensity of EB use in the Netherlands is higher than in Bulgaria and Germany. The general pattern of how vacancies are composed is similar, with general and job-specific information being most frequent across all contexts. Most displays of EB have to do with “corporate culture” and “identity,” which is in line with the dynamic perspective of EB (Andersen et al. 2013; Lievens and Slaughter 2016). Whether the Dutch language uses more words than other languages is complex and can depend on various linguistic and sociolinguistic factors. Research does not directly compare the total number of words used in Dutch to those in other languages in a straightforward manner. However, studies on the linguistic variation of vacancy texts point out that vacancies may be lengthier depending on the industry and complexity of the role, with longer descriptions requiring more precision of the role or procedures (Kuiken and Vedder 2007; Wieling et al. 2011). The North of the Netherlands seems more focused on a utilitarian approach with more weight on “development opportunities” and less on “corporate culture” and “image.” This seems particularly strong for the energy sector compared to the German one. Across industries, particularly the health sector, it seems to stand out with a more utilitarian approach towards “professional development” and “CSR” as expressed by “ethical responsibility.” Healthcare uses mostly EB aspects relating to corporate culture in terms of the team one would work with, the expertise of people, and benefits. IT positions itself with aspects of EB such as “image” and “opportunities for training and development.” In IT vacancies, leadership, partners, and clients are emphasized, as well as company specializations and value as an “image” positioning more than in energy and healthcare. Conversely, the EB dimension of “uniqueness” is the least used EB aspect among all three industries and countries.

The fundamental contribution of this article lies in its attempt to identify and provide an overview of relevant differences in the use of EB aspects depending on specific industry and country contexts. The findings have theoretical and practical implications. Firstly, empirically, this study shows that the manifestation of EB is context-dependent.

As such, EB is not a universal but rather a multidimensional concept, and the use of different EB dimensions varies depending on the context. In line with the conceptual section, this study shows that depending on the industry or country, a different significance is assigned to different dimensions of EB. Therefore, the study fits within the stream of literature tackling specificities in EB resulting from internationalization or the dynamics of the specific context (Alniçik et al. 2014; Sivertzen et al. 2013; Špoljarić and Došen 2023). Secondly, results reveal to managers and practitioners in multinational companies with a worldwide brand, in particular, that distinct aspects of EB are emphasized depending on the context. In other words, not a one-size-fits-all approach is likely to succeed, but hiring practices would differ depending on the specific context. This can help managers compose a compelling EB message with care, leading to successful recruitment in a specific industry or country. Human resource and communication practitioners should first examine the specific context and target group they are aiming at and then develop their EB strategy, accordingly, carefully evaluating each EB dimension for the context at hand. Thirdly, results show that industry differences exist within the same cultural context in the EB manifestations, which presents opportunities for cross-sectoral learning.

The results are not generalizable to all companies in the same industry and country. The study suggests elements to consider but they are not homogenous. Rather, heterogeneity exists and should be applied with care within the same industry or same culture. However, more emphasis on “core values,” “identity characteristics,” and “norms” would benefit all industries and cultures regardless of the specific nuances they use to manifest these values. Moreover, cultural differences affect people’s perceptions of and attitudes toward job characteristics (Moran et al. 2010) and their intention to apply (Gowan 2004). It is essential for an organization to acknowledge the cross-cultural aspects and to develop strategies according to those differences. To remain competitive as an appealing employer in the industry, Love and Singh (2011) suggest that companies should establish a corporate culture that provides a rewarding work experience for their employees and ensure the compatibility between prospective employees and firms’ cultures. Cultural theories could be combined with our study as a further avenue for research to craft a tailored EB strategy. For example, given that the Netherlands has the lowest Hofstede dimension in masculinity of the three countries studied, organizations strive for consensus and value equality, solidarity, and quality in their working environment (Hofstede Insights 2023). Thus, to craft the USP in their EB strategies, companies in this context should emphasize work-life balance and work atmosphere as part of the “uniqueness” and “corporate culture” of their EB proposition.





Limitations of this paper stem from the fact that it is based on a small number of vacancies covered and that results cannot be generalized beyond the industries and countries. Although the study is a useful first step, future studies might cover vacancies in other industries and countries to gain a more extensive understanding of using each EB dimension and find patterns between industries. Studying how EB cues can be applied to other organizational communication rather than only vacancies is another valuable focus for future research. The study implies that distinct aspects of EB are emphasized depending on the context. Although there are similarities, employing EB strategies in different contexts is limited to the single target market. One of the limitations of our study is that it goes beyond the scope of our study to explore the effectiveness of the used EB strategies. Future research should assess the applicant's perceptions in these markets to determine the effectiveness of the EB strategies for attracting applicants. Given EB's multidimensional nature, future research should explore further the question of what context characteristics lead specifically to what EB dimensions.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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