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# How to deal with negative online employer reviews: An application of image repair theory

Rouven Kollitz<sup>1</sup> | Sascha Ruhle<sup>2</sup>  | Annika Wilhelmy<sup>3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Business Administration and Economics, Heinrich-Heine-University Düsseldorf, Düsseldorf, Germany

<sup>2</sup>Department of Human Resource Studies, Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands

<sup>3</sup>Department of Psychology, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

## Correspondence

Sascha Ruhle, Department of Human Resource Studies, Tilburg University, Prof. Cobbenhagenlaan 225, 5037 DB Tilburg, PO Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, Dusseldorf, The Netherlands.  
Email: [s.a.ruhle@tilburguniversity.edu](mailto:s.a.ruhle@tilburguniversity.edu)

## Abstract

Although negative employer reviews pose a threat to employers by reducing organizational attractiveness, employers can respond to reviews to avert these threats. However, we lack a clear understanding of the response strategies and factors that determine response strategies' impact. To address this issue, we introduce image repair theory (IRT) as a promising theoretical foundation in the study of employer response. Using an experimental design, we tested the effects of IRT's general image repair strategies (i.e., Denial, Evasion of Responsibility, Reducing Offensiveness, Corrective Action, and Mortification) and the mechanisms underlying these effects according to IRT. Moreover, we explored the role of review content (i.e., the type of employer image information the review entails) as a contingency factor. We found differences between Denial, Corrective Action, and Mortification, which show that the choice of response strategies can matter and that the relationship between response strategy and potential applicants' perceptions of organizational attractiveness is mediated by attributions of responsibility rather than by perceived offensiveness. In addition, our results suggest that when negative reviews contain information about instrumental rather than symbolic employer image attributes, potential applicants can attribute more responsibility to the employer. Furthermore, only the effects of Reducing Offensiveness and Mortification were dependent on the review's content. We discuss theoretical implications and practical recommendations for employers that respond to negative employer reviews.

## KEYWORDS

employer reviews, image repair theory, organizational attractiveness, response strategies, word-of-mouth

## Practitioner points

- Negative Online Employer Reviews can reduce an organization's attractiveness as an employer.

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- Responding to such a review as an employer might not automatically be better than not responding.
- Evidence built up on the Image Repair Theory suggests that perceived responsibility rather than perceived offensiveness is an important factor related to the effect of the response.
- Using a defensive response can be superior to an accommodative response when mitigating a single negative review.
- Using positive information about one's company might be particularly helpful when the company is accused of negative symbolic attributes.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

A recent change in recruitment is that employer review sites, such as Glassdoor and Kununu, allow potential applicants access to company information that was previously unavailable to organizational outsiders (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015). Employer review sites, which have recently seen an uptake in usage, operate similarly to peer-review sites used for consumption decisions (e.g., TripAdvisor, Yelp). Instead of providing product evaluations, however, employer review sites allow employees to review their employers and share their working experiences with others (Dabirian et al., 2017; Melián-González & Bulchand-Gidumal, 2017). According to prior research, employer reviews can be considered as a specific type of electronic (i.e., web-based) word-of-mouth (eWOM), and can contain both positive and negative information (Evertz et al., 2021; Stockman et al., 2020).

If negative information is provided, this poses a threat to an organization's attractiveness as an employer. For instance, Kununu, a large employer review site in Europe (Dabirian et al., 2017), posits that a single negative review can deter potential applicants (Kununu, 2020) and recent research supports this view (Melián-González & Bulchand-Gidumal, 2016; Stockman et al., 2020). As a consequence, employers need to contend with such negative reviews and decide whether to ignore or respond to them (Dineen et al., 2019; Van Noort et al., 2015). In this regard, recent findings suggest that responding to negative employer reviews might be superior to remaining silent, as it can positively affect potential applicants' attitudes and intentions (Carpentier & Van Hove, 2021; Könsgen et al., 2018). However, to date, a comprehensive framework that informs research on the broad variety of employer response strategies has yet to be established. In other words, little is known about the "how" of responding, that is, the specific ways in which an employer's response should be framed to offset the damaging effects of a negative review. Accordingly, there have been calls for more research on the effects of different response strategies (Könsgen et al., 2018), their underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions such as the review's content (Carpentier & Van Hove, 2021). Addressing these calls is crucial because other research domains such as complaint management and crisis communication indicate that response strategies matter with regard to stakeholders' perceptions and behavior after negative

events (e.g., Claeys et al., 2010; Dens et al., 2015; Dutta & Pullig, 2011; Johnen & Schnittka, 2019).

Therefore, the present research aims to examine a broad variety of employer response strategies to negative employer reviews, their effect on organizational attractiveness including potential mechanisms, and the influence of the review's content. We first provide a multidisciplinary review of the literature on specific response strategies that employers may use. Based on this review, we introduce image repair theory (IRT; Benoit, 1995, 2015) as a promising theoretical foundation to systematize employer response strategies. We then apply IRT's general response strategies (i.e., Denial, Evasion of Responsibility, Reducing Offensiveness, Corrective Action, and Mortification) together with a no response strategy in an experimental study ( $N = 383$ ) to test if these image repair strategies can mitigate a negative employer review's effect. Moreover, we examine whether the two components of a persuasive attack that IRT proposes, namely attribution of responsibility and perceived offensiveness (Benoit, 1995), mediate the effects of image repair strategies on organizational attractiveness. Furthermore, we explore whether the influence of negative reviews and image repair strategies depend on the review's content (i.e., information about instrumental vs. symbolic employer image attributes; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003).

This paper makes four contributions to the recruitment literature. First, we go beyond past work on employer responses to negative reviews by examining *what* strategies exist. We provide an overview of frameworks and typologies from a broad range of literature to enhance our understanding of the multifaceted strategies with which employers can respond to negative employer reviews. We argue that IRT (Benoit, 1995, 2015) is particularly helpful to differentiate and comprehend employer responses to negative reviews. Indeed, findings from a pilot study with field data from Kununu suggest that the five general strategies that IRT proposes are useful to reliably capture the range of employers' responses. Second, we provide evidence of *how effective* each of these strategies is. Specifically, we show that the strategies of Denial, Corrective Action, and Mortification are particularly promising in preventing the decrease in organizational attractiveness caused by a negative review. Third, we extend prior research on employer responses by explaining *how* response strategies can consolidate potential applicants' perceptions

of organizational attractiveness. Whereas IRT proposes attribution of responsibility and offensiveness as potential mechanisms—depending on what strategy is used—our findings suggest that attribution of responsibility serves as the main mechanism for most strategies. Finally, we go beyond past research on response strategies by examining review content as a contingency factor that might influence when strategies are effective. For example, Carpentier and Van Hoya (2021, p. 287) pointed out that “the effectiveness of a response might also depend on the review content.” In our study, we show that negative reviews tend to be more harmful when they contain information about instrumental instead of symbolic employer image attributes by increasing attributions of responsibility. In contrast, we find that the mitigating influence of responses seems largely independent of review content, with Reducing Offensiveness and Mortification being exceptions.

## 2 | EMPLOYER RESPONSES TO NEGATIVE REVIEWS

Online employer reviews represent evaluations that current or former employees or applicants post online and that entail ratings, text, video, or any combination of these elements (Carpentier & Van Hoya, 2021). Research on online employer reviews has just started to emerge, but initial findings suggest that positive employer reviews can enhance organizational attractiveness (Evertz et al., 2021), whereas the opposite seems to hold about negative reviews (Melián-González & Bulchand-Gidumal, 2016; Stockman et al., 2020). When negative information is provided, this causes a substantial threat, calling for employers to intervene. In this regard, a recent finding by Carpentier and Van Hoya (2021) is that employers can mitigate negative effects by responding to the respective reviews and thus providing potential applicants with their own view of the situation. In addition, they found that Denial, where the organization denies responsibility for the problems described in the review, can lead to more favorable perceptions of an employer than an accommodative response, which accepts responsibility and not responding at all. Interestingly, an accommodative response was found to be as ineffective as providing no response, suggesting that response strategy matters. However, the authors indicate that more nuanced research is needed that considers a broader range of different strategies, their effects, mechanisms, and interactions with review content (Carpentier & Van Hoya, 2021).

Consequently, a fruitful next step is to develop a more profound understanding of the different response strategies employers can use to mitigate a negative review's effects. We argue that to gain a more nuanced perspective on response strategies, recruitment research looks to other fields that have long-established research on response strategies to negative events. Therefore, we screened and summarized publications from multiple research domains to identify typologies of responses to negative events or information. To facilitate future research on responses to negative employer reviews,

we provide an overview of the typologies and taxonomies that resulted from our literature review in the Supporting Information.

Our review revealed that some studies apply a dichotomous perspective contrasting a single type of response versus no response (e.g., Könsgen et al., 2018; Sparks et al., 2016), or specific forms of verbal accounts such as denial and acknowledgment (e.g., Elsbach, 1994), whereas others have compared multiple strategies (e.g., Dawar & Pillutla, 2000; Dutta & Pullig, 2011), or scrutinized combinations of different strategies (e.g., Claeys et al., 2010; Dens et al., 2015; Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). In particular, there is a growing body of research in the field of online complaint management drawing on the defensive-accommodative distinction (Marcus & Goodman, 1991) based on which response strategies can be categorized as either defensive, which means they deny responsibility for a negative event, or accommodative, which comprises the acceptance of responsibility, the promise of remedial actions, or both (e.g., Chang et al., 2015; Johnen & Schnittka, 2019; C. H. Lee & Cranage, 2014; Y. L. Lee & Song, 2010; Li et al., 2018; Weitzl et al., 2018). However, crisis communication literature seems most prolific because it offers more fine-grained typologies of organizational response (e.g., Benoit, 1995; Bradford & Garrett, 1995; Coombs, 2007). Among these, IRT (Benoit, 1995, 2015) has been stated to be the most comprehensive and widely applied typology of response strategies (Seeger & Griffin Padgett, 2010).

Although prominent in crisis communication, IRT represents a general and broader approach that at its core is concerned with how people and organizations use messages “designed to improve images tarnished by criticism and suspicion” (Benoit, 2015, p. 3). In terms of message options, there are five general image repair strategies that an organization (or a person) may use to defend or rebuild its threatened image. These general strategies rely on the basic principles of persuasive communication (Benoit, 2015) and can thus be applied to various contexts such as online complaint management (e.g., Einwiller & Steilen, 2015) and recruitment (e.g., Steiner & Byrne, 2019). Specifically, IRT allows to theorize how organizational attractiveness (i.e., the holistic employer image; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016) is affected by both negative reviews and responses, while providing a fine-grained systematization of response strategies. Therefore, we consider IRT to be the most fruitful typology for our study, using it as a theoretical foundation in our subsequent analysis.

## 3 | IRT

In a basic image repair situation, an entity accuses another of wrongdoing (i.e., a persuasive attack, e.g., in a negative employer review), and the accused entity creates a message (i.e., employer response) to repair that attacked image (i.e., in our case perceptions of organizational attractiveness). According to IRT, “wrongdoing” is referred to as the act, which is construed broadly and can, for example, include failure to perform expected actions or having acted poorly (Benoit, 2015). In the eyes of potential applicants, such an

act—something that an employer did wrong—can put them off from wanting to work for that employer.

A persuasive attack consists of two components that are both fundamental to understanding its effects, and how repair processes may function. First, the accused must be held *responsible* for the act in question. Specifically, IRT suggests that when potential applicants read a negative employer review, they will form an impression of whether the employer is to be held responsible for the act, which can then alter their perceptions of the employer. Second, if nothing happened or what did happen is not considered *offensive*<sup>1</sup> (i.e., undesirable), there is no threat. In other words, actions<sup>2</sup> can vary in the degree of perceived offensiveness with more offensive actions causing greater damage to an employer's attractiveness (Benoit, 2015).

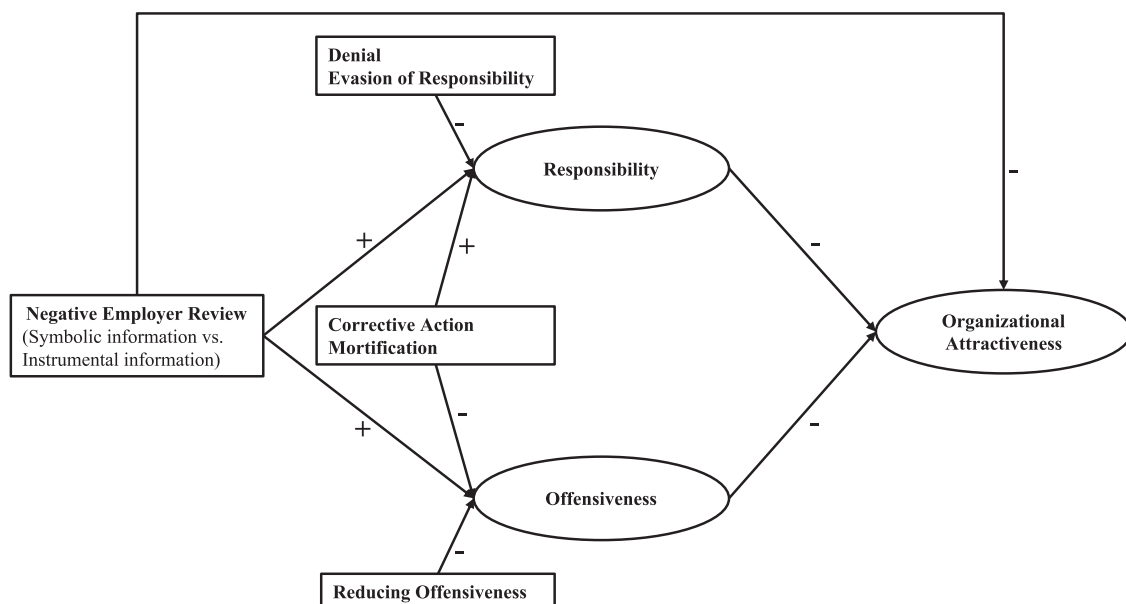
Consequently, if both conditions are believed to be true, that is, the persuasive attack makes the relevant audience think that the employer is responsible and believe that the act is offensive, perceptions of organizational attractiveness are impaired. When applying IRT to employer responses to negative reviews, we need to consider potential applicants' perceptions of both the employer's responsibility for and the offensiveness of the situation portrayed in the negative review. Accordingly, we conceptualize negative employer reviews as persuasive attacks and employer responses as image repair strategies. Next, we develop hypotheses about the effects of image repair strategies on organizational attractiveness and the underlying mechanisms. These are summarized in Figure 1 (together with the hypothesized effects of the negative review's content, see Section 5).

## 4 | IMAGE REPAIR STRATEGIES AND THEIR MECHANISMS

IRT offers five general image repair strategies, three of which have variants (see Table 1). These strategies address either the perceived responsibility, the offensiveness of the act, or both (Benoit, 2015).

### 4.1 | Denial and Evasion of Responsibility

To reduce the attributed responsibility, an employer can use a Denial strategy where it denies that the act in question occurred or that it was performed by the employer (Benoit, 2015). For example, employers who are accused of providing employees with poor working conditions might simply deny that this is the case. Employers can also choose Evasion of Responsibility as a response strategy, which also strives to reduce responsibility (Benoit, 2015). However, in contrast to Denial, employers claim, for example, that they cannot be held fully responsible due to a lack of information or control over the situation. Consequently, if employers choose to use the image repair strategies of Denial (e.g., stating that the working conditions portrayed in a negative review are not true), or Evasion of Responsibility (e.g., dodging the blame), potential applicants would hold the employer less responsible. This in turn should buffer the negative employer review's harmful effect on organizational attractiveness. Therefore, we hypothesize:



**FIGURE 1** Conceptual model of image repair strategies buffering a negative employer review's effect. The measure of organizational attractiveness before the manipulation was included as control variable because it might affect the initial interpretation of the negative employer review. As we do not have specific hypotheses about the interaction effects between image repair strategies and review content, these are not depicted in our conceptual model. However, a visualization of the interaction effects per strategy because of our exploratory analysis (Hypothesis 7) is provided in Figure 2.

TABLE 1 Overview of image repair strategies

Image repair strategy	Key characteristic	Example quote	Coder agreement (%)	Prevalence in real Kununu-data (%)	Correct assignment by SMEs (%)
Denial					
<b>Simple denial</b>	Did not perform act	"For this very reason, we will comment on the assertion that we ourselves write positive reviews with exactly the wording that is appropriate for this: The assertion is wrong." (Employer Response No. 18)	95.95	3.10	82.14
Shift the blame <sup>a</sup>	Act performed by another	-	100	-	-
Evasion of Responsibility					
Provocation	Responded to act of another	"The cuts you mention are the result of strategic decisions that follow the longterm implementation of corporate goals and ensure the competitiveness of [company name]." (Employer Response No. 5)	97.30	2.48	21.43
<b>Defeasibility</b>	Lack of information or ability	"In a company of the size of [company name], it is a great challenge to ensure an optimum flow of information at all times." (Employer Response No. 42)	91.89	1.86	85.71
Accident <sup>a</sup>	Act was a mishap	-	100	-	-
Good Intentions	Meant well in the act	"Cooling elements were newly adjusted by the property management, which should immediately counteract the heat development. If this did not work in some places, we can understand your displeasure." (Employer Response No. 59)	98.65	0.62	78.57
Reducing Offensiveness					
<b>Bolstering</b>	Stress good traits	"[Company name] is a fair, reliable and modern employer. We offer our employees first-class qualifications, a wide range of development prospects, very good social standards and good opportunities for participation." (Employer Response No. 2)	89.19	32.23	85.71
Minimization	Act not serious	"[As for cohesion among colleagues], in our regular surveys we score good to very good. This value is relatively stable over many years. Even here at kununu you can validate this." (Employer Response No. 18)	94.59	6.20	60.71
Differentiation	Act less offensive	"You have landed here on [name] corporate group's site. I could see from your review that it rather refers to one particular store." (Employer Response No. 46)	97.30	0.62	32.14
Transcendence	More important considerations	"Regarding your criticism of 'restructuring,' I would like to point out that such a process is unfortunately always associated with some fundamental changes. The aim of the measures is to modernize and strategically align [company name] to be successful in the future and to be able to offer good jobs." (Employer Response No. 65)	91.89	2.48	46.43

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Image repair strategy	Key characteristic	Example quote	Coder agreement (%)	Prevalence in real Kununu-data (%)	Correct assignment by SMEs (%)
Attack the Accuser	Reduce credibility of the accuser	"However, we would also like to make it clear that we do not comment on statements based on speculation and hearsay." (Employer Response No. 18)	90.54	9.30	75.00
Compensation	Reimburse victim	<sup>b</sup>			
Corrective Action	Plan to solve or prevent a problem	"We have taken your feedback on the subject of educational opportunities as an opportunity to further sensitize cybersecurity executives to this topic." (Employer Response No. 59)	97.30	39.67	85.71
Mortification	Apologize for act	"We are sorry you had to go through these experiences." (Employer Response No. 68)	98.65	1.86	100

Note: Image repair strategies and key characteristics adapted from Benoit (1997, p. 179). Copyright by 1997 JAI Press Inc. Strategies whose effects were experimentally tested are shown in bold. Dash indicates that no example was found within the data.

<sup>a</sup>Strategy excluded from the validation procedure a priori.

<sup>b</sup>Compensation was excluded from the coding procedure a priori.

**Hypothesis 1** – Responding to a negative employer review with a Denial-Response will lead to (a) higher organizational attractiveness compared to no response and (b) this relationship will be mediated by a reduction of the attribution of responsibility.

**Hypothesis 2** – Responding to a negative employer review with an Evasion of Responsibility-Response will lead to (a) higher organizational attractiveness compared to no response and (b) this relationship will be mediated by a reduction of the attribution of responsibility.

## 4.2 | Reducing Offensiveness

Further, employers can focus on decreasing the perceived offensiveness of the situation described in the review by using the Reducing Offensiveness strategy (Benoit, 2015). For example, to reduce offensiveness, an employer can try to strengthen the audience's positive affect toward itself by highlighting positive attributes or reminding the audience of positive actions that the employer has performed in the past. By doing this, the amount of negative affect from the accusation remains the same, but positive feelings toward the actor can partially offset the negative feelings associated with the act (Benoit, 2015). Overall, Reducing Offensiveness aims to avert persuasive attacks, but does not target the employer's responsibility. Instead, the idea is to decrease offensiveness by increasing potential applicants' esteem of the employer or by finding other ways of counteracting potential negative feelings induced by the review. We thus expect the following relationships:

**Hypothesis 3** – Responding to a negative employer review with a Reducing Offensiveness-Response will lead to (a) higher organizational attractiveness compared to no response and (b) this relationship will be mediated by a reduction of perceived offensiveness of the situation.

## 4.3 | Corrective Action and Mortification

Finally, an employer can use strategies that influence both responsibility and offensiveness, such as Corrective Action and Mortification. Corrective Action entails the promise that future actions are carried out to restore the state of affairs and/or to ensure that the offensive act would not occur again (Benoit, 2015). According to IRT, Corrective Action is not necessarily the same as admitting guilt. However, this strategy should influence the audience's attributions of responsibility. For example, B. K. Lee (2004) stated that in a crisis context, Corrective Action represents the greatest possible acceptance of responsibility because by identifying and fixing the source of the problem, the organization not only shows an effort to prevent future crisis but also exhibits responsibility for the current crisis. Employers that make use of Mortification (also referred to as apology; Benoit, 1997) claim full responsibility for the

act (Conlon & Murray, 1996). For example, they can explicitly accept the blame, express regret, or ask for forgiveness.

Despite the potential for negative consequences that may result from accepting responsibility, organizations still make extensive use of Corrective Action and Mortification as response strategies (Arendt et al., 2017; Ferguson et al., 2018; S. Kim et al., 2009). This suggests there are positive effects of accepting responsibility that might outweigh the negative ones. Findings on apology as a response to a trust violation show that the effectiveness of an apology builds on the notion that its benefits (based on potential redemption) outweigh its costs (based on acceptance of responsibility; P. H. Kim et al., 2004). Accordingly, if potential applicants accept an employer's apology or believe that the employer is striving to fix the problem, they may choose to pardon the wrongful act, which would offset the negative effects related to attributions of responsibility. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 4** – *Responding to a negative employer review with a Corrective Action-Response will lead to (a) higher organizational attractiveness compared to no response, and this relationship will be mediated by (b) an increase in the attribution of responsibility and (c) a reduction of perceived offensiveness of the situation.*

**Hypothesis 5** – *Responding to a negative employer review with a Mortification-Response will lead to (a) higher organizational attractiveness compared to no response, and this relationship will be mediated by (b) an increase in the attribution of responsibility and (c) a reduction of perceived offensiveness of the situation.*

## 5 | REVIEW CONTENT AS CONTINGENCY FACTOR

In addition, we argue that the effects of negative reviews and image repair strategies might depend on the review's content. More specifically, we expect effects to be contingent on the employer image information the review entails, which allows potential applicants to draw inferences about the employer's attributes (Highhouse et al., 2007). According to the instrumental-symbolic framework (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003), the specific attributes an individual associates with an employer, that together make up the employer image can be broadly categorized as being either instrumental (functional) or symbolic (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). Instrumental image attributes describe the organization in terms of objective, concrete, and factual attributes—attributes which it either has or not. These attributes may attract potential applicants because of their utility, which means they allow them to maximize benefits and minimize costs (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Examples for such attributes are pay, advancement opportunities, and job security (Van Hove & Saks, 2011). Symbolic image attributes describe the organization in terms of subjective and intangible attributes and convey symbolic company information in the form of imagery and general trait inferences that potential applicants assign to organizations (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Examples are traits such as sincerity, competence, and prestige (Van Hove & Saks, 2011).

As for positive employment-related word-of-mouth, prior research supports a view that its effects on organizational attractiveness can vary based on whether the message contains instrumental employer image information, which might primarily stimulate inferences about instrumental employer attributes, or symbolic employer image information, which might primarily stimulate inferences about symbolic employer attributes (Van Hove et al., 2016). Specifically, it was found that symbolic information can have stronger effects on organizational attractiveness than instrumental information (Van Hove et al., 2016). However, whether this finding holds true for negative online employer reviews is yet to be determined, especially when considering the mechanisms suggested by IRT (i.e., responsibility and offensiveness; Benoit, 2015).

Regarding responsibility, communication of instrumental employer image information should be less susceptible to misinterpretations (i.e., knowledge bias; Eagly et al., 1978) by the source than symbolic employer image information. It would therefore lead to less attribution of the negative review to internal (i.e., reviewer-related) reasons. As for negative reviews, marketing research supports this view. Consumers are more likely to attribute a negative review to the reviewer's internal reasons if a hedonic compared to a utilitarian product is reviewed (Sen & Lerman, 2007), with the latter being primarily functional and instrumental (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000). In the case of instrumental information, potential applicants may exclude the reviewer as a reason for the negative review and instead hold the employer responsible, making the employer less attractive according to IRT.

Regarding offensiveness, we also expect instrumental employer image information to have stronger effects than symbolic employer image information. For example, potential applicants who read a description of poor instrumental attributes (e.g., low pay, no promotion opportunities, or fixed working hours) should perceive this as a stronger violation of the principle of reciprocity than when reading a description of poor symbolic attributes (e.g., low innovativeness or low prestige). Thus, potential applicants would evaluate the offensiveness of the portrayed working conditions differently depending on the type of employer image information, with instrumental information creating particularly strong perceptions of offensiveness and harm to an organization's attractiveness as an employer. Taken together, instrumental employer image information should have stronger effects on attributions of responsibility, perceived offensiveness, and potential applicants' perceptions of organizational attractiveness than symbolic employer image information. Thus, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 6** – *The effect of negative employer reviews is contingent on the type of employer image information the review entails such that information about instrumental employer image attributes will lead to (a) higher attribution of responsibility, (b) higher perceived offensiveness of the situation, and (c) more of a decrease in organizational attractiveness than exposure to a negative employer review providing information about symbolic employer image attributes.*

Yet, the type of employer image information being communicated may not only influence the effects of negative employer



reviews but also be a contingency factor regarding the effects of image repair strategies. As Dutta and Pullig (2011) showed, the effectiveness of image repair strategies can differ depending on whether a brand's perceived ability to deliver functional as compared to symbolic benefits is impaired by a negative event—a distinction that is quite in line with the instrumental-symbolic perspective adopted in the present study. More specifically, the authors found that in cases where the negative event (i.e., brand crisis) reduced the brand's perceived ability to deliver functional benefits, Corrective Action was more effective in restoring brand attitude than both Reducing Offensiveness and Denial. In contrast, if confidence related to symbolic benefits was negatively affected by the event, the brand attitude was equally restored by Corrective Action and Reducing Offensiveness with both strategies being more effective than Denial. To provide initial evidence on whether such a contingency-based view finds support in the context of negative employer reviews, we examine the influence of employer image information on the buffering effects of image repair strategies. Thus, our final hypothesis is as follows:

**Hypothesis 7** – *The effect of image repair strategies is contingent on the type of employer image information the review entails (i.e., information about instrumental vs. symbolic employer image attributes).*

## 6 | METHODS

To test whether Denial, Evasion of Responsibility, Reducing Offensiveness, Corrective Action, and Mortification had the hypothesized effects, we used a validated negative employer review (Pilot Study 1) and validated response strategies (Pilot Studies 2 and 3) within an experimental design. Further, we explored the role of content to answer Hypothesis 7. The materials used in the vignette experiment are displayed in Supporting Information: Appendices A–C.

### 6.1 | Design and procedure

We employed a  $2 \times 6$  between-subjects factorial design in which we manipulated the content of the review (information about instrumental vs. symbolic employer image attributes) and the employer's response (Denial, Evasion of Responsibility, Reducing Offensiveness, Corrective Action, Mortification, and No Response). The vignette study was administered via an online survey. First, participants were asked to think and act as they would if they were looking for a job (following the procedures of prior studies, e.g., Carpentier & Van Hove, 2021; Evertz et al., 2021) and received general information about the employer. They were then asked to indicate the extent to which they were attracted to the organization overall (*pre*). As for the employer, we chose a fictitious organization ("Marzeo") located in the retail industry because this allowed us to exclude possible influences

of prior knowledge that could have affected information processing (Carpentier & Van Hove, 2021). Having rated organizational attractiveness for the first time, participants were then randomly assigned to 1 of the 12 experimental conditions, where the negative review of the employer together with the employer's response was presented, except for the No Response-Conditions, where the negative review but no response was presented. Afterward, we asked participants to rate the offensiveness of the situation portrayed in the review and the extent to which the employer is to be held responsible for the situation with both scales being presented in random order. Finally, participants rated the organization's overall attractiveness for a second time (*post*) and completed a questionnaire that contained items to detect survey inattentiveness, a manipulation check, an assessment of attitudes toward employer review sites and source expertise, and several control measures.

### 6.2 | Data, sample, and checks

Following previous work on the effects of employer reviews in a recruitment context (Könsgen et al., 2018), we recruited our sample via Clickworker, a German crowdsourcing platform where individuals can be contacted to perform different computer tasks. We offered 1.50€ for survey completion. This equals an hourly compensation of approximately 10.00€ when taking the average time spent on the survey into account, which was 8 min and 47 s ( $SD = 6.95$  min). As part of the sampling, participants were informed that incorrectly answering items detecting survey inattentiveness ("attention checks") would result in a lack of compensation.

Based on the correct answers to the attention checks, which comprised two items that instructed participants to choose a specific answer (Barber et al., 2013) and a single item asking for the employment status of the reviewer, participants were either included or excluded from the sample. This resulted in 502 participants that finished the online survey. Due to the nature of the sample and the primary financial incentive to participate, we applied strict criteria to identify careless responses (Meade & Craig, 2012). However, we conducted all analyses with the initial and final samples to test for the robustness of the effects. Overall, 60 participants (11.95%) did not correctly answer the attention checks required for payment.<sup>3</sup> Tests of this dropout revealed that this missingness was unrelated to the manipulation, age, or gender of the participants.

In addition, we used an instructional attention check regarding the employers' reaction that was unrelated to the payment to identify within-sample careless responses. This resulted in the exclusion of another 59 (13.34%) participants that did not correctly identify that the employer did (not) respond to the review. Again, this was unrelated to the manipulation, age, or gender. Further, we conducted a stimulus check regarding the content of the review, which seven individuals failed to answer correctly. We decided to retain these individuals within the sample, as they correctly identified all other checks and tests. The results, however, were robust with and without these individuals.

As a result, the final sample consisted of 383 completed surveys. Two hundred forty-one participants were male (62.9%), 140 female (36.6%), and two individuals reported other as gender (0.05%). Further, age ranged from 18 to 67 with an average of 38.86 years ( $SD = 12.27$ ). Nearly all participants (97.4%) in our study had work experience, which ranged from 0 to 47 years with an average of 16.66 years ( $SD = 12.19$ ). When being asked about their current job search status, 26.1% of the participants said they were actively looking for a job, which is comparable to previous recruitment research (e.g., Nikolaou, 2014). Together, this led us to conclude that respondents are an adequate research sample to study potential applicants' perceptions of organizational attractiveness. Note that between 27 and 37 participants were in each experimental condition.

Before carrying out this study, three pilot studies were conducted to develop and validate the experimental material (see Supporting Information: Appendices A–C). First, we developed and validated a negative employer review (Pilot Study 1). We then drew on IRT to systematize employer response strategies and develop prototypical employer response vignettes that reflected pure image repair strategies (Pilot Study 2). Finally, we validated these response vignettes (Pilot Study 3). The detailed procedures and results of the pilot studies are provided in the Supporting Information.

### 6.3 | Pilot Study 1: Development and validation of negative employer review vignettes

The aim of Pilot Study 1 was to develop and validate the fictitious negative reviews to be used as stimuli in our main study. We drew on prior research on instrumental and symbolic employer attributes to formulate statements that targeted these attributes and employed a 2 (instrumental information; symbolic information)  $\times$  2 (one-sided review; two-sided review) between-subjects factorial survey pre–post design. Participants were 146 German undergraduate business administration students who voluntarily took part in the study (see the Supporting Information for a sample description). They were asked to think and act as they would if they were looking for a job and were introduced to some general information about a fictitious retail employer called “Marzeo.” Then they were asked to indicate the extent to which they were attracted to the organization. Having rated the organization's overall attractiveness, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions, where a negative review of the employer was presented that provided information about working conditions at the company. To enhance external validity, the layout of the fictitious review was designed to look like a real review of the employer as can be seen in the Supporting Information: Figures 1 and 2 (Carpentier & Van Hoyer, 2021; Evertz et al., 2021; Stockman et al., 2020). More specifically, we structured the information in the review to reflect content categories provided by kununu.com, a large employer review site in Europe (Dabirian et al., 2017). After having read the review, participants rated the organization's attractiveness for a second time. We used the same organizational attractiveness measure as in the

main study (see below). Finally, they completed a questionnaire containing various checks, an assessment of attitudes toward the review, and several control measures. The average perceived realism was 3.64 ( $SD = 0.76$ ) and did not significantly differ between the vignettes ( $F(3,146) = 2.612, p = .054$ ). Thus, overall, the reviews were perceived as fairly realistic.

Further, we checked whether the review was considered negative by assessing the valence of the review using the item “How negative was the review?” on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 = *not negative at all* to 7 = *completely negative* (K. T. Lee & Koo, 2012). The average valence was 5.53; the assessment did not significantly differ between the four vignettes ( $F(3,146) = 2.067, p = .102$ ) and indicates that the review was considered negative. To provide evidence for the negative effect of the negative reviews, we used a repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) in IBM SPSS 26. A repeated-measures ANOVA determined that the mean change in perceptions of organizational attractiveness differed significantly between the measurement times ( $F(1,142) = 171.468, p < .001, \eta^2 = .547$ ), with a mean of 5.01 ( $SD = 1.19$ ) before the manipulation and 2.95 ( $SD = 1.22$ ) after the review. Furthermore, we found that exposure to a one-sided negative employer review led to a greater decrease in organizational attractiveness than exposure to a two-sided negative employer review, which is why we focused on one-sided reviews in our further procedures. Together with the evidence from above, the negative employer review vignettes can be considered suitable as stimuli for the main study.

### 6.4 | Pilot Study 2: Development of employer response vignettes based on image repair strategies

Although the application of IRT is theoretically sound, there is no empirical evidence on the extent to which its proposed strategies cover real-life employer responses to negative reviews. Therefore, we decided to screen and code real employer responses according to image repair strategies to provide initial evidence for the applicability of IRT. Further, this allowed for a more profound understanding of how image repair strategies could be operationalized within the context of employer review sites.

To assess the real-life prevalence of employer responses, we collected data for the 30 DAX-listed companies (i.e., the 30 major German companies trading at the Frankfurt stock exchange; <https://boerse-frankfurt.de/indices/dax>) and the companies that in 2019 were listed in either the students' or young professionals' top 100 employer ranking of the Trendence Institute (<https://trendence.com>). Data were retrieved from Kununu (<https://kununu.com>), a popular employer review site that has served as a data source in prior research on employer reviews (e.g., Könsgen et al., 2018). Our search resulted in 144 companies of which 74 (51.4%) were found to have responded to negative employer reviews at least once on Kununu. This sample size is comparable to similar coding procedures in prior research (e.g., Waung et al., 2017). Interestingly, this suggests that nearly half of the employers

we reviewed opted for a no-response strategy when it comes to dealing with negative employer reviews.

For each of the 74 companies, two of the authors coded the most recent response individually. We excluded the strategy Compensation from the coding procedure a priori because, in contrast to a product- or service context, the assignment of tangible resources to compensate for a failure (e.g., the refund of money, change of the good or service, or discounts for a future purchase; Del Río-Lanza et al., 2009) does not apply to a long-term exchange relationship like the one between employee and employer (Gardner et al., 2011). Consequently, we coded the 13 repair strategies, reflecting the 5 general image repair strategies, as suggested by IRT. Percentages, quotes, and coder agreement per strategy are presented in Table 1. Overall, the authors' agreement regarding strategies being used was, on average, 95.63%. As such, we found that all responses we coded were covered by IRT.

To ensure theoretical alignment with IRT (Benoit, 1995, 2015), one author, who was not involved in the coding procedure described above, designed employer response vignettes based solely on theoretical considerations. Following the general description of image repair strategies provided by IRT (and thus possibly differing from real employer responses), 13 vignettes were created. Another author, who was involved in the coding procedure, developed employer response vignettes reflecting the responses found on Kununu. Both kinds of vignettes were then discussed and merged to achieve vignettes that were both theoretically sound and realistic. Regarding the strategies Shift the Blame and Accident, consensus was reached that such vignettes would not be realistic. As well, given that these two strategies were not identified within the Kununu-data, we excluded them from subsequent analyses. Having developed prototypical vignettes for the remaining 11 image repair strategies, these were then validated and refined in the next step.

## 6.5 | Pilot Study 3: Content validation of employer response vignettes

To validate the employer response vignettes, we conducted a validation study with 28 subject matter experts (SMEs) from the field of human resource management, including both practitioners ( $n = 15$ ) and researchers ( $n = 13$ ). SMEs were first provided with a short description of each of the 11 strategies. Next, for each image repair strategy, a vignette of an employer's response to an employer review was presented. The employer review itself was not displayed because according to IRT, image repair strategies are supposed to work independently of the respective type of persuasive attack (or, in our case, a negative employer review). After reading each response (i.e., the vignette), participants were asked to indicate which image repair strategy the employer was most likely using in their response. Following this logic, participants were asked to assign an image repair strategy to each of the 11 vignettes which were displayed in random order. Further, participants were asked to provide additional, qualitative feedback regarding content, realism, and the communication style of each vignette.

To assess the validity of response vignettes, we calculated the percentage of SMEs' correct assignment to the underlying image repair strategy for each vignette. We found that employer response vignettes differed significantly with respect to their distinctiveness. While the majority of SMEs correctly identified Simple Denial (82.14%), Defeasibility (85.71%), Good Intentions (78.57%), Bolstering (85.71%), Minimization (60.71%), Attack the Accuser (75.00%), Corrective Action (85.71%), and Mortification (100%), there was less consensus regarding Provocation (21.43%), Differentiation (32.14%), and Transcendence (46.43%). Consequently, not all image repair strategies in our vignettes were correctly identified. This was also indicated by the qualitative feedback provided by SMEs, which we used for further refinement of our vignettes. We modified the vignettes for clarity following SMEs' suggestions.

Further, the qualitative feedback provided by SMEs pointed at some overlap between strategies, leaving room for ambiguous interpretations. For example, concerning Good Intentions an SME commented "Within this response, I identify two potential strategies: Good Intentions and Transcendence" (SME #9). We thus decided to narrow the number of vignettes down to one representative strategy per general strategy (i.e., one strategy for Denial, Evasion of Responsibility, Reducing Offensiveness, Corrective Action, and Mortification, respectively) because we expected differences between general strategies to be most salient, which makes it more likely to find effects. Specifically, for the general strategies that encompass variants (Denial, Evasion of Responsibility, and Reducing Offensiveness), we focused on those strategies that were most clearly identified by SMEs and that were most prevalent in the Kununu-data (see Table 1). Following this rationale, in the main study we experimentally tested the effects of Denial (i.e., Simple Denial), Evasion of Responsibility (i.e., Defeasibility), Reducing Offensiveness (i.e., Bolstering), Corrective Action, Mortification, and No Response in mitigating a negative employer review's effect.

## 6.6 | Measures

All measures in the main study used a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

### 6.6.1 | Organizational attractiveness

We measured organizational attractiveness at both points in time with the overall attractiveness scale suggested by Aiman-Smith et al. (2001). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .95 pre and .96 post the manipulation and congeneric reliability was equally good, with .95 pre and .96 post. The premeasure of organizational attractiveness served as a control variable in our analyses.<sup>4</sup>

### 6.6.2 | Perceived offensiveness

To measure perceived offensiveness, we adapted six items of Tata's (2000) and Jones et al. (1987) offensiveness scales, which we

considered as suitable to assess perceived offensiveness in the context of employer review sites (see Appendix D). Moreover, instead of using scales that were anchored with opposing labels (e.g., acceptable/unacceptable), participants had to indicate their agreement to the statements. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .88 and congeneric reliability was .90.

### 6.6.3 | Attribution of responsibility

To measure attribution of responsibility, four items were adapted from Griffin et al. (1992) and Kaltcheva et al. (2013) to assess a company's responsibility (see Appendix E). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .92, and congeneric reliability was .92.

We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis for a four-factor model and evaluated the model fit using the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), standardized root-mean residual (SRMR), and the root-mean-squared error of approximation (RMSEA). We also used changes in the  $\chi^2$  statistic to evaluate model comparison and calculated Cronbach's  $\alpha$  as well as the congeneric reliability for each construct (Cho, 2016). Although the  $\chi^2$  test was significant ( $\chi^2(134) = 265.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ) the results of the fit indices indicated that the four-factor model fits the data well, with CFI = 0.97, SRMR = 0.040, RMSEA = 0.051.<sup>5</sup> We decided to remove one item from the offensiveness scale ("Taking all the information into account, the situation is unjustified.") as the factor loading was low (0.42).<sup>6</sup> All other items had factor loadings ranging from 0.71 (offensiveness) to 0.93 (organizational attractiveness [post]).

To test the effects of image repair strategies and review content on offensiveness, responsibility, and the change of organizational attractiveness (Hypotheses 1–6), we used the multiple-indicator-multiple-cause (MIMIC) approach in Mplus (Breitsohl, 2019). This allowed us to include the latent nature of the variables, measurement errors, model fit evaluations, as well as modeling the mediation, all of which increase the validity of the results. Note that in the MIMIC

approach squared standardized path coefficients can be interpreted as effect sizes (Breitsohl, 2019).

## 7 | RESULTS

Latent means by condition appear in Table 2. The observed mean of organizational attractiveness was 5.12 (SD = 1.20) before the manipulation (i.e., after the general information on the employer) and 3.16 (SD = 1.22) after the manipulation (i.e., after the review and response).

As we could not show invariance across groups (Breitsohl, 2019), we used dummy codes for both the review content (information about instrumental vs. symbolic employer image attributes) and the image repair strategies (using No Response as a reference category) and calculated the direct, indirect, and total effects on organizational attractiveness using MPlus. All results for standardized effect sizes can be found in Table 3.<sup>7</sup> First, Denial had no direct effect on organizational attractiveness ( $\beta = .006$ ,  $p = .896$ ), but was related to both offensiveness ( $\beta = -.175$ ,  $p = .006$ ) and responsibility ( $\beta = -.272$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with a standardized total effect on organizational attractiveness of  $B = .203$ ,  $p < .001$ , thus supporting Hypothesis 1. Second, neither Evasion of Responsibility nor Reducing Offensiveness had a direct or indirect effect on offensiveness, responsibility, or organizational attractiveness, as such Hypotheses 2 and 3 were not supported. Third, Corrective Action had a significant negative effect on offensiveness ( $\beta = -.151$ ,  $p = .028$ ) and through that, a specific indirect effect on organizational attractiveness ( $B = .039$ ,  $p = .041$ ) via offensiveness. Yet, it had no total significant effect on organizational attractiveness, thus only providing partial support for Hypothesis 4. Finally, we found a competitive mediation for Mortification, which showed a direct positive effect on organizational attractiveness ( $B = 0.109$ ,  $p = .031$ ), but a negative indirect effect via responsibility ( $B = -.115$ ,  $p = .002$ ), resulting in an insignificant total effect ( $B = 0.015$ ,  $p = .826$ ), accordingly Hypothesis 5 was not supported. With regard to Hypothesis 6, we found that

Content	Variables	Strategy						
		Denial	EOR	RO	CA	Mort.	NR	Overall
Instrumental	Responsibility	4.20	4.71	4.76	4.76	4.92	4.73	4.68
Symbolic		4.11	4.53	4.30	4.43	4.95	4.50	4.47
Instrumental	Offensiveness	4.23	4.15	4.32	4.44	4.22	4.91	4.30
Symbolic		4.19	4.48	4.33	4.01	4.38	4.36	4.29
Instrumental	Change in OA	-1.41	-2.26	-2.18	-2.11	-2.16	-2.29	-2.07
Symbolic		-1.41	-1.97	-1.54	-1.78	-2.24	-2.15	-1.84

Note: Standard deviations are omitted for the sake of clarity. Responsibility, offensiveness, and organizational attractiveness were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale. Change in organizational attractiveness is the difference between the pre- and postmeasure of organizational attractiveness. Content refers to the type of employer image information the review entails (i.e., information about instrumental vs. symbolic attributes).

Abbreviations: CA, Corrective Action; EOR, Evasion of Responsibility; Mort., Mortification; NR, no response; OA, organizational attractiveness; RO, Reducing Offensiveness.

TABLE 2 Latent means of the main study

**TABLE 3** MIMIC results for the main study

Variables	Offensiveness		Responsibility		Organizational attractiveness (post)	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Intercept	6.03*	0.019	5.32*	0.037	3.60*	0.072
Content	-0.028	0.053	-0.121*	0.051	-0.006	0.039
Denial	-0.175*	0.064	-0.272*	0.070	0.006	0.047
Evasion of Responsibility	-0.087	0.065	0.050	0.062	0.058	0.053
Reducing Offensiveness	-0.083	0.067	-0.020	0.065	0.081	0.047
Corrective Action	-0.151*	0.074	-0.035	0.065	0.006	0.045
Mortification	-0.080	0.053	0.208*	0.059	0.109*	0.050
Controls						
Organizational attractiveness (pre)	-0.097	0.058	-0.066	0.056	0.363*	0.043
Mediator						
Offensiveness					-0.261*	0.058
Responsibility					-0.555*	0.055
R <sup>2</sup>	3.2%		16.4%		54.3%	
Total standardized effects						
Content					0.068	0.049
Denial					0.203*	0.065
Evasion of Responsibility					-0.052	0.063
Reducing Offensiveness					0.114	0.062
Corrective Action					0.064	0.060
Mortification					0.015	0.042

Note:  $N = 383$ . Standardized coefficients, strategies are coded in contrast to a No Response Strategy, Content (1 = instrumental, 2 = symbolic).

The total standardized effects of the strategies are equal to those effects found when only analyzing the direct relationship, omitting mediators (Offensiveness/Responsibility), the Control (OA pre) as well as the other manipulations (Content).

\* $p < .05$ .

information about symbolic attributes was negatively related to responsibility ( $\beta = -.121$ ,  $p = .017$ ), supporting Hypothesis 6a. Yet, content was unrelated to offensiveness ( $\beta = -.028$ ,  $p = .594$ ) and organizational attractiveness ( $\beta = -.006$ ,  $p = .875$ ), thus Hypothesis 6b and Hypothesis 6c were not supported.

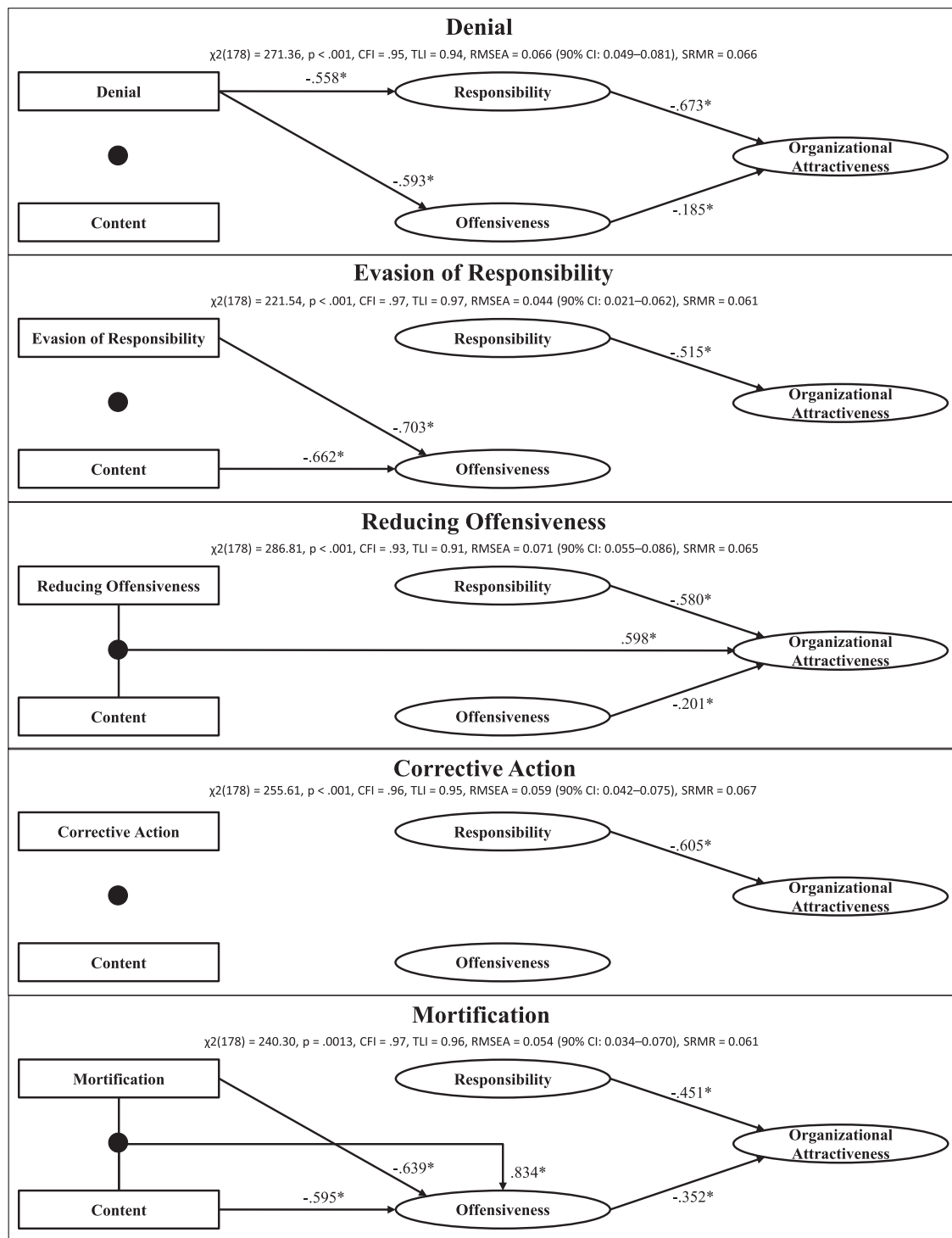
To obtain a clearer picture of each image repair strategy and its possible interaction with the content of the review, as outlined in Hypothesis 7, we explored each strategy on its own. We used five models that included organizational attractiveness at both measurement times, offensiveness, responsibility, the respective strategy, the content, as well as the interaction between strategy and content. Figure 2 depicts the findings for each model.

Overall, we found that attribution of responsibility was always significantly negatively related to organizational attractiveness, while the role of perceived offensiveness was less consistent, as it was unrelated to organizational attractiveness when Evasion of Responsibility or Corrective Action were used. With regard to the interaction

between strategy and content, few significant interactions were found. There was a significant interaction between Reducing Offensiveness and review content on organizational attractiveness. In an instrumental setting, Reducing Offensiveness had no effect, while in the symbolic setting, Reducing Offensiveness significantly increased organizational attractiveness. Further, Mortification and content interacted with regard to offensiveness, as Mortification was ineffective when the content was concerned with symbolic employer image attributes, but perceived offensiveness decreased when the content related to instrumental employer image attributes.

## 8 | DISCUSSION

The present research opened with the question of how employers could (or even should) respond to negative employer reviews. To answer this question and advance our understanding of responses to



**FIGURE 2** Structural equation models for the relationships between each separate strategy, content, responsibility, offensiveness, and organizational attractiveness. Path model with standardized coefficients. Direct effect of organizational attractiveness before the manipulation, indicators, measurement errors, residual variances, covariances between exogenous variables and insignificant paths are omitted for clarity. Interactions are represented by filled black circles. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , and \*\*\* $p < .001$

employer reviews, we drew on IRT (Benoit, 1995, 2015). IRT not only allows for a fine-grained systematization of employer response strategies, but also sets sound theoretical perspectives on potential applicants' processing of both a negative employer review and an employer's response. Our experimental investigation of image repair

strategies' effects indicated that responding to a negative review might not automatically be beneficial for perceptions of organizational attractiveness if compared to remaining silent. Instead, effects largely depended on the response strategy chosen. In addition, our findings indicated that attributions of responsibility rather than

perceived offensiveness can be a mediator in the relationship between response strategy and organizational attractiveness. Furthermore, when negative reviews contain information about instrumental rather than symbolic employer image attributes, study participants attributed more responsibility to the employer. In addition, the mitigating effect of response strategies seemed largely independent of the review content.

## 8.1 | Theoretical implications

The present research holds theoretical implications for the literature on managing organizational attractiveness and IRT. First, our work provides initial insight into the strategies that employers use to respond to negative reviews. Recently, research has started to examine the effects of negative online employer reviews on potential applicants' attitudes and intentions (Melían-González & Bulchand-Gidumal, 2016; Stockman et al., 2020) and how an employer's response can mitigate these effects (Carpentier & Van Hove, 2021; Könsgen et al., 2018). To date, however, a comprehensive framework of the broad variety of employer response strategies was lacking. For this reason, our work provides a multidisciplinary review of different conceptualizations and the ways in which employers can respond to negative employer reviews. We found that responses can be systematized as strategies of IRT and provided initial evidence for the applicability of the IRT (Benoit, 1995, 2015) on employer reviews. Findings from our pilot study indicate that Bolstering and Corrective Action were used most frequently when employers responded to negative reviews, which parallels findings in crisis communication (S. Kim et al., 2009).

In addition, we extend prior research by examining the effects of a broad range of different response strategies. Our results not only indicate that responding as an employer might not automatically be better than not responding, but also that the effects of image repair strategies can differ. In our study, most differences were found between Denial, Corrective Action, and Mortification. Consistent with previous research on employer responses (Carpentier & Van Hove, 2021), our findings suggest Denial can be superior to other response strategies in mitigating the adverse effects of a single negative employer review. Interestingly, we found that Denial might not only be related to attributions of responsibility, but also to perceived offensiveness, which was unexpected given our a priori theoretical considerations based on IRT. We found that if the employer declares that accusations raised in the negative review are simply not true, this can significantly buffer negative perceptions of an employer by decreasing both attributions of responsibility and perceived offensiveness. This is important because it may answer Carpentier and Van Hove (2021) question of whether a Denial could still result in improved attitudes, even if the employer is not able to provide counterevidence.

Regarding Corrective Action, our findings do not support the view that it maximizes attributions of responsibility (B. K. Lee, 2004), as we found it to be solely related to perceived offensiveness. This is

interesting, as it suggests that if the employer vows to fix the problems in the future, the significance of the current incident might be reevaluated. As for Mortification, we found that it led to an increase in the attribution of responsibility, which supports the notion that an apology can represent an acceptance of responsibility (Conlon & Murray, 1996). However, contrary to our expectations based on IRT, Mortification was unrelated to offensiveness and did not buffer the impairment of organizational attractiveness, but instead had a direct positive effect on potential applicants' attraction to the employer. As Mortification did not offset the negative effects of the employer review in our study, it seems that its benefits do not necessarily outweigh its costs (P. H. Kim et al., 2004). More specifically, although the use of Mortification can be rewarded with enhanced perceptions of organizational attractiveness, it can be offset by increased perceptions of offensiveness, which, in turn, impairs potential applicants' attraction to the employer. As these effects run contrary to each other, this might explain why Mortification did not result in more favorable perceptions of organizational attractiveness.

Another interesting finding arises when comparing the results of Denial, Corrective Action, and Mortification from a defensive-accommodative perspective (Coombs, 1998; Marcus & Goodman, 1991). While there is evidence to suggest that accommodative responses, in general, outperform defensive ones (e.g., Y. L. Lee & Song, 2010; Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017), recent research has challenged this view by providing evidence that defensive responses can be superior depending on the respective context (Johnen & Schnittka, 2019). Together with the findings provided by Carpentier and Van Hove (2021), our findings broaden this perspective by showing that in the context of employer review sites, a defensive response (i.e., Denial) can be superior to an accommodative response (i.e., Corrective Action and/or Mortification) when mitigating a (single) negative review's effects.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, we provide initial evidence on how response strategies might consolidate perceptions of organizational attractiveness and how responsibility and offensiveness can be simultaneously affected by image repair strategies. Interestingly, our findings suggest that attribution of responsibility can serve as the main mechanism for most strategies even though IRT generally proposes both responsibility and offensiveness as potential mechanisms. Consequently, our findings indicate that potential applicants might be primarily concerned with whether the employer is to be held responsible for what happened rather than how "bad" it was. This suggests that similar to research on complaint management (e.g., Chang et al., 2015; Y. L. Lee & Song, 2010; Weitzl et al., 2018), recruitment research should fruitfully draw on attributional processes, particularly attribution of responsibility, to explain the effects of response strategies on company evaluations.

Furthermore, we extend prior research and respond to calls in the literature (e.g., Carpentier & Van Hove, 2021) by building on the instrumental-symbolic framework (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003) and examining whether the influence of negative employer reviews and response strategies are contingent on the review's content. Our results show that negative reviews tend to be more fatal for perceptions of organizational attractiveness when they consist of

information that relates to instrumental rather than symbolic employer image attributes by increasing attributions of responsibility. This is in line with the assumption that potential applicants consider information about instrumental attributes to be less susceptible to misinterpretations by the reviewer, therefore, leading to less reviewer-related and more employer-related attribution. An alternative explanation for this finding may lie in potential applicants' perceptions of controllability (i.e., the degree to which the cause for an inconvenience is subject to volitional alteration), which are linked to inferences of responsibility (Weiner, 2000). That is, potential applicants might expect employers to be more in control of instrumental attributes so that criticism regarding these attributes results in higher attributions of responsibility. Interestingly, this is contrary to the finding that potential applicants are more influenced by symbolic versus instrumental information regarding employer attractiveness (Van Hoya et al., 2016). This may suggest that employer reviews need to be considered a unique source of employer information with different boundary conditions than other word-of-mouth sources, such as family members, friends, or acquaintances (Van Hoya & Lievens, 2009; Van Hoya, 2012).

Regarding response strategies, we found that their overall effect on organizational attractiveness was largely independent of the negative review's content. However, we found that the specific influences of two strategies, Reducing Offensiveness and Mortification, differed depending on what information the review contained. For Reducing Offensiveness, we found no effects when the negative review contained information about instrumental attributes, but a positive direct influence on organizational attractiveness when the negative review contained information about symbolic attributes. A possible explanation could be that it is easier to change potential applicants' minds about an accusation when the accusation is about symbolic attributes (e.g., low innovativeness) that are more abstract and vaguer and thus more easily overridden than instrumental attributes (e.g., low pay) that are more actual and concrete. In contrast, for Mortification, we found no effects when the negative review contained information about symbolic attributes, but a decrease of perceived offensiveness when the negative review contained information related to instrumental attributes. In other words, it seems particularly beneficial for employers to apologize when an accusation is about instrumental attributes (e.g., low pay) because potential applicants tend to perceive the shortcoming as less severe due to the apology. A possible explanation could be that, according to an attributional perspective, if the employer apologizes for a concrete issue, potential applicants anticipate the issue to improve in the immediate future (i.e., considering the cause for the inconvenience as unstable; Weiner, 2000), which propitiates the potential applicants and makes the issue seem more acceptable.

## 8.2 | Practical implications

When it comes to dealing with negative reviews, our findings advocate that employers may take an active stance and respond to

offset its detrimental effects. As for the "how," Denial stands out, as it can significantly reduce both attributions of responsibility and perceived offensiveness, which in our study buffered the impairment of perceptions of organizational attractiveness after a negative review. This suggests that it could be beneficial for organizations to refute accusations of being a bad employer, which is of high relevance given that the anonymity on employer review sites can lead to frustrated reviewers exaggerating in their negative reviews or even telling lies to unjustifiably harm the employer (Dabirian et al., 2017).

Although evidence for the superiority of Denial emerges (e.g., Carpentier & Van Hoya, 2021), we suggest that this response strategy be used with caution. That is, employers should only flat-out deny a complaint if they are certain it is not true, because if the complaint is justified, denying would be unethical and could backfire. In addition, research in the field of service recovery suggests that refutation of negative reviews is only acceptable if the review balance (i.e., the ratio of positively and negatively valenced reviews; Purnawirawan et al., 2012) is positive, whereas if the review balance is neutral or negative, Denial is the worst option (Dens et al., 2015). This suggests that Denial may serve to effectively avert persuasive attacks under certain circumstances, but also has the potential to do an employer more damage than good. As for these contingencies, however, our findings provide initial evidence that the type of criticized employer attributes might play an inferior role. That is, employers that opt to deny a negative review may do so regardless of whether the review entails information about instrumental or symbolic employer attributes.

Our findings further indicate that providing positive information about one's company in response to a negative review (i.e., Reducing Offensiveness in the form of Bolstering) might be particularly helpful when the company is accused of negative symbolic attributes. In contrast, apologizing might be particularly helpful when the company is accused of negative instrumental attributes. Thus, employers should be mindful of what exactly the accusation in the negative review is about and choose their response strategy accordingly.

## 8.3 | Limitations and future research

The present research has several limitations. A major limitation is the lack of generalizability of the employer reviews and responses used. The employer review used in our experiment included a combination of many different complaints instead of focusing on a specific complaint, which might have been more realistic. As a result, it seems hard for an employer to address such a broad range of complaints in one response. Relatedly, the responses used in our study were quite broad and perhaps less convincing than a more complaint-specific response that employers would usually use in practice. A potential consequence is that the present experiment might have not allowed a fair test of the strengths of each of the strategies. The issue of restricted realism is somewhat mitigated by the fact that we tested the realism of employer review manipulation as part of our Pilot



Study 1, and the results showed that the review manipulation was perceived as fairly realistic. In addition, in Pilot Study 3, we asked the SMEs to comment on the realism of the employer responses and carefully reviewed the feedback we received. Nevertheless, we encourage future research to use more event- or situation-based content in employer reviews and to present employer responses that explicitly refer to the original reviews and that are equally well aligned with each of the image repair strategies to be tested. More specifically, pilot studies could help to ensure high realism (i.e., specific complaints and complaint-specific responses) and a fair test of the different strategies (i.e., different responses being equally well aligned with the reviews). Furthermore, given that research has recently shown that potential applicants seem to be less receptive to negative word-of-mouth about organizations they are familiar with, using real organizations instead of fictitious ones is warranted (Stockman et al., 2020).

Another limitation is related to the external validity of our findings. Similar to previous research (e.g., Carpentier & Van Hove, 2021), our study participants were exposed to a single negative employer review. This is in contrast to real-life scenarios, as potential applicants who consult employer review sites will seldom find a single negative (or positive) review. Rather, just like consumers on product review sites, they will sift through a set of reviews (Purnawirawan et al., 2015). In this regard, consumer research offers ample opportunities for future research, such as studying how readers are affected by balance and sequence of online review sets (e.g., Purnawirawan et al., 2012), factors that may also determine the effectiveness of organizational response strategies (e.g., Dens et al., 2015). Therefore, we suggest that further research explore how potential applicants react to a set of reviews and whether exposure to multiple reviews shapes the impact of an employer's response. Correspondingly, our sample did not consist exclusively of potential applicants, which might also reduce external validity. It is possible that individuals who are not potential applicants are less likely to visit employer review sites and in addition, might have a different evaluation process of the occurring event. This might weaken or change the effects of the response strategies applied. Consequently, future research might delve deeper into the differences between actual applicants, potential applicants, and other individuals.

About response strategies, we limited our analysis to one specific strategy per general image repair strategy of the IRT due to considerations of their applicability and parsimony. Consequently, for some general image repair strategies, specific strategies were left out (e.g., Minimization), which future research could analyze to broaden the perspective provided by the present study. Further, we focused on the effects of pure image repair strategies, that is, we were interested in the isolated effects of strategies rather than in the effects of a combination of strategies. However, this somewhat contradicts reality, as employers would integrate different strategies when responding to negative reviews. Therefore, a fruitful area for further work would be to experimentally test combinations of different strategies. For example, crisis communication literature suggests that Bolstering would work best as a supplement to other

strategies (Coombs, 2007) and there is evidence in the field of service recovery where a combination of accommodative responses can lead to significantly more favorable reactions than an isolated accommodative response (Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). Future research could scrutinize different elements of employers' responses by applying a discourse perspective and analyze whether there is a typical structure of rhetorical moves used by employers to manage organizational attractiveness (Zhang & Vásquez, 2014).

Finally, an avenue for future research would be to shed light on the role of complainant characteristics. For example, current employees, as well as ex-employees or applicants might also be relevant sources of word-of-mouth (Dineen et al., 2019). In support of this view, evidence has been found that, under some circumstances, positive employer reviews provided by applicants can positively affect potential applicants' perceptions of organizational attractiveness (Evertz et al., 2021). Therefore, it would be interesting to see whether negative reviews provided by sources other than current employees can harm an organization's attractiveness as an employer and if so, whether any damage can be averted by means of an employer's response.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data will be available on reasonable request.

## ORCID

Sascha Rühle  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7855-2647>

Annika Wilhelmy  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8566-3521>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Note that these evaluations are not primarily concerned with language in terms of "offensive speech" which refers more to the linguistic style of a social media post (Parker et al., 2019). Rather, they reflect a particular type of moral judgment about behaviors or outcomes (Malle et al., 2014; Page, 2019), such as actions performed or omitted by an employer, or working conditions as a result of these actions.
- <sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that for both components—the attribution of responsibility and perceived offensiveness—attributions and perceptions of the relevant audience (e.g., potential applicants) are more important than reality (Benoit, 2015).
- <sup>3</sup> The attention check items were based on Barber et al. (2013). Eight participants received payment without participating in the questionnaire at all.
- <sup>4</sup> The pattern and levels of significance of the effects remained stable when the premeasure of organizational attractiveness was excluded from the analysis.
- <sup>5</sup> For robustness, we also ran the model including all 502 initial participants. This model showed a worse fit ( $\chi^2 = 740.99$ ,  $df = 284$ ,

$p < .001$ , CFI = 0.95, SRMR = 0.045, RMSEA = 0.057,  $\Delta\chi^2(0) = 148.92$ , which can be considered evidence that supports the exclusion of the respective participants.

<sup>6</sup> We also ran our analysis including the item, and the results remained stable.

<sup>7</sup> As for robustness, we calculated MANOVAs, and the results were in line with the MIMIC results.

<sup>8</sup> Please see Supporting Information: Table 3 for additional analyses that we conducted to compare the different strategies.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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