

Audience visibility and the employer brand: how instrumental and symbolic attributes shape employee satisfaction across evaluative contexts

Cam Tu Tran

Business School, National Economics University, Hanoi, Vietnam

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigates the context-dependent nature of the relationship between employer brand attributes and employee satisfaction across publicly visible and confidential evaluation contexts within Vietnam's financial services sector.

Design/methodology/approach – A dual-source comparative design was employed, combining digital-trace data with structured survey evidence. Study 1 analyzed 3,285 standardized Glassdoor reviews, representing a publicly visible evaluation context. Study 2 surveyed 507 employees, representing a confidential evaluation context. The study's cross-context comparison was based on a harmonized analysis of four employer-brand attributes available in both datasets: compensation and benefits, career opportunities, work–life balance and organizational culture. Employee satisfaction was used as the outcome variable. The regression models were estimated separately, and their standardized coefficients were compared descriptively.

Findings – All four attributes were positively associated with employee satisfaction in both datasets, while their relative importance differed across evaluative contexts. Organizational culture, a symbolic attribute, had the largest standardized coefficient in the publicly visible review context, whereas compensation and benefits and career opportunities occupied the leading positions in the confidential survey model.

Originality/value – Drawing on social exchange theory as an explanatory lens and impression management theory to interpret differences associated with audience exposure, the study proposes audience visibility as a plausible boundary condition. By comparing publicly visible online reviews with confidential survey responses, the study further shows that these two data environments provide complementary rather than interchangeable representations of employer evaluation.

Keywords Employer brand, Glassdoor, Employer reviews, Employee satisfaction, Audience visibility, Evaluative context

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

As labor markets become increasingly competitive, organizations compete not only through compensation or job design but also through the value that employees believe an employer offers. This has positioned the employer brand (EB hereafter) as a central strategic tool in talent management (Theurer *et al.*, 2018). While EB is often discussed in relation to attracting applicants, current employees occupy an equally important position because they evaluate the employer based on direct experience rather than from external signals alone (Tran *et al.*, 2024). Their satisfaction therefore provides a meaningful indicator of EB effectiveness, reflecting the extent to which the employer value proposition is consistently enacted in everyday work experiences (Bharadwaj *et al.*, 2022). To explain why EB attributes are associated with employee satisfaction, we draw on social exchange theory, which views employment as a reciprocal relationship in which employees evaluate what the organization provides in return for their effort and participation (Homans, 1958).



While social exchange theory explains why employees respond positively to valued employer offerings, the instrumental-symbolic framework clarifies what kinds of value those offerings represent (Lievens and Highhouse, 2003). The framework remains a dominant lens for organizing EB attributes into tangible and intangible dimensions (Van Hoya et al., 2013). However, while this framework clarifies what types of employer value are offered, prior research demonstrates that the relative importance of particular attributes is not fixed and may vary across applicant groups, industries and organizational settings (Van Hoya et al., 2022; Hein et al., 2025). Therefore, to continue this context-contingent line of research, this study examines an underexplored evaluative dimension: whether employees express their assessments in a publicly visible or confidential environment. Drawing on impression management theory, audience visibility is proposed as a plausible boundary condition that may help explain differences in the relative importance of EB attributes across evaluative settings (Leary and Kowalski, 1990; Busse et al., 2017; Crawford et al., 2019). Publicly visible reviews are accessible to prospective applicants, current employees, employers, competitors and other stakeholders (Dabirian et al., 2017; Landers et al., 2019; Carpentier and Van Hoya, 2021). Employees posting in such settings may give greater emphasis to meaning-based and self-expressive aspects of employment, such as organizational culture (Crawford et al., 2019; Höllig et al., 2024). Confidential surveys, by contrast, reduce exposure to external audiences and may enable employees to focus more directly on employment provisions tied to personal utility, security and career prospects (Hoppe et al., 2022; Van Hoya et al., 2022).

To examine this possibility, the study employs a dual-source comparative design. Study 1 analyzes 3,285 Glassdoor reviews, representing a publicly visible evaluation context in which anonymous employee assessments are accessible to external audiences. Study 2 draws on confidential survey responses from 507 full-time employees. For comparability, the analysis examines the associations between employee satisfaction and four EB attributes available in both studies: compensation and benefits, career opportunities, work–life balance and organizational culture. The models are estimated separately and compared descriptively instead of a formal test of moderation due to the differences in the samples and measures. By integrating unsolicited employee-generated reviews with structured confidential survey evidence, the dual-source design also responds to calls for methodological diversification in EB research and allows public reviews and confidential surveys to be treated as complementary rather than interchangeable representations of employer evaluation (Tran et al., 2024; Rita et al., 2026).

A further gap concerns the contextual scope of EB attribute research. Although the instrumental-symbolic framework has demonstrated strong explanatory value in developed Western settings, evidence regarding the relative importance of employer attributes in emerging economies remains comparatively limited (Tanwar and Prasad, 2016; Špoljarić and Ozretić Došen, 2023; Kanwal and Van Hoya, 2024). In collectivist and high power-distance contexts, employees may place distinct evaluative weight on culturally resonant factors such as shared organizational culture, trusted leadership and collective reputation (Hofstede Insights, 2018; Cong and Thu, 2021; Hein et al., 2025). Vietnam provides a relevant setting to examine these dynamics because it is a rapidly growing socialist-oriented market economy characterized by economic transition, collectivist values and high power distance (Hofstede Insights, 2018; Cuong, 2024). Within this context, the financial-services sector offers a revealing case: it plays a central role in economic modernization, employs a growing cohort of skilled professionals and faces mounting recruitment and retention challenges driven by digital transformation, foreign competition and rising employee expectations for both economic and symbolic employer value (Maharani and Tamara, 2024; Mishra et al., 2025).

Consequently, this study makes three primary contributions. First, it proposes audience visibility under a plausible boundary condition that could change the relative importance of employer offerings. This contribution adds nuance to the instrumental-symbolic framework by showing that EB attributes should not be treated as having fixed positions across evaluative settings. Second, the study offers a methodological contribution by estimating the same four-

attribute model across two distinct employee-data environments: unsolicited Glassdoor reviews and structured confidential survey responses. This dual-source design demonstrates that public employer reviews and confidential surveys provide complementary rather than interchangeable representations of employee evaluation. Third, the study extends EB research to Vietnam's financial-service sector, providing evidence from a dynamic emerging-market setting that remains underrepresented in the literature. By situating the analysis in this context, the study highlights the relevance of both instrumental and symbolic employer value in a sector marked by talent competition, digital transformation and rising employee expectations.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1 *Employer brand and the instrumental-symbolic framework*

EB refers to the perceived benefits that prospective and current employees associate with an organization, enabling differentiation in the labor market. More specifically, it represents the set of functional, economic and psychological associations through which individuals interpret what an organization offers as an employer and what it would mean to work for that organization (Ambler and Barrow, 1996). EB should therefore be distinguished from employer branding: the former concerns the perceptions and associations held by employment audiences, whereas the latter refers to the organizational processes used to develop, communicate and sustain those associations (Lievens and Slaughter, 2016; Theurer *et al.*, 2018). For current employees, these perceptions are grounded not only in formal EB communication but also in their direct experiences of human resource practices, leadership, workplace relationships and everyday employment conditions (Davies *et al.*, 2018; Tran *et al.*, 2024).

To better understand the content and consequences of EB value, the instrumental-symbolic framework proposed by Lievens and Highhouse (2003) is frequently referenced in prior related work. Instrumental attributes include factors such as pay, benefits, advancement opportunities, job security, task demands and working conditions because these features address individuals' interest in maximizing rewards and minimizing costs (Caputo *et al.*, 2023; Kanwal and Van Hove, 2024). Symbolic attributes, by contrast, reflect trait-like inferences and socio-emotional meanings, such as organizational culture, prestige, leadership quality, reputation and corporate social responsibility and they matter because employment also serves identity, belonging and self-expressive functions (Lievens and Highhouse, 2003; Tanwar and Prasad, 2016).

Several studies show that symbolic attributes explain incremental variance beyond instrumental conditions and in some contexts, symbolic meanings differentiate organizations more strongly than traditional job features (Lievens *et al.*, 2007). At the same time, instrumental conditions remain foundational: conjoint evidence suggests that moderately attractive instrumental attributes may be a precondition for symbolic attributes to become salient, rather than something symbolic signals can simply compensate for (Hoppe *et al.*, 2022). Crucially, the literature does not support treating instrumental and symbolic attributes as competing explanations. Instead, the two categories are analytically distinct but jointly constitutive of employer value (Theurer *et al.*, 2018; Tran *et al.*, 2024). Prior studies have also shown that both types of attributes can influence how individuals evaluate organizations as employers, particularly in relation to employer attractiveness, organizational image, employee satisfaction and broader employee attitudes (Lievens and Slaughter, 2016; Davies *et al.*, 2018; Tran *et al.*, 2024).

2.2 *Employer brand attributes and employee satisfaction: a social exchange perspective*

Employee satisfaction captures an individual's overall sense of fulfillment and contentment within their professional role (Judge *et al.*, 2017). In high-contact and performance-driven environments such as the financial-services sector, satisfaction is an important employee

outcome because it is closely linked to performance, commitment and retention (Nguyen *et al.*, 2014; Mishra *et al.*, 2025). Within the EB framework, satisfaction can be understood as an employee response to the extent to which an organization's instrumental and symbolic offerings align with employee needs and values. Social exchange theory provides a useful explanatory lens for this relationship by viewing employment as a reciprocal arrangement in which employees evaluate what the organization provides in return for their effort and participation (Homans, 1958). From this perspective, EB attributes represent valued employer offerings that employees assess as part of the employment relationship. When these offerings are perceived as credible, supportive and meaningful, employees may be more likely to evaluate their employment experience positively.

For the current study, instrumental attributes available across datasets are compensation and benefits, career opportunities and work–life balance. Compensation and benefits represent one of the organization's most direct economic returns for employee contributions and are often placed among the core instrumental elements of employer value because they help create perceptions of fairness and trust (Tanwar and Prasad, 2016; Bharadwaj *et al.*, 2022). Cross-cultural EB evidence likewise shows that above-average salary and attractive compensation packages rank highly in many contexts, although their relative salience differs across groups (Wojtczuk-Turek *et al.*, 2024). Career opportunities represent a more future-oriented form of instrumental employer value. They may therefore contribute to satisfaction not only through present job conditions but also by shaping employees' expectations about the future value of remaining with the organization (Tanwar and Prasad, 2016; Anh *et al.*, 2019). Work–life balance reflects the extent to which employment conditions allow employees to sustain both professional and non-work responsibilities and is a major determinant of job satisfaction. Supportive work–life arrangements can therefore be expected to improve satisfaction by reducing strain and making continued participation in the employment relationship more sustainable (Tarigan *et al.*, 2022; Maharani and Tamara, 2024).

Symbolic attributes should also be expected to influence employee satisfaction, but through somewhat different mechanisms. Symbolic EB associations communicate how the organization is likely to treat people, what kind of collective it represents and whether affiliation with it supports employees' desired self-image (Kanwal and Van Hoye, 2024; Van Hoye *et al.*, 2022). In the present analysis, organizational culture is the only symbolic attribute available in both datasets. That operationalization is theoretically appropriate because organizational culture consists of shared values, norms, behavioral expectations and the broader social and psychological environment that shape how employees understand the organization and their place within it (Tanwar and Prasad, 2016; Tarigan *et al.*, 2022). A favorable organizational culture may contribute to satisfaction by communicating shared values, support and a positive sense of affiliation. In collectivist and high-power-distance societies, culture may be especially relevant to employees' assessments because it reflects relational harmony, organizational cohesion and the broader social meaning of employment (Hofstede Insights, 2018; Cong and Thu, 2021).

Taken together, the literature supports the expectation that favorable evaluations of instrumental EB attributes and of organizational culture as a symbolic EB attribute are positively associated with employee satisfaction. Yet employee satisfaction is not driven only by economic returns or only by symbolic meaning; rather, employees evaluate the employment relationship through both utility-based and identity-based lenses, consistent with the instrumental-symbolic framework and the reciprocal logic of social exchange (Bharadwaj *et al.*, 2022). Accordingly, we hypothesize that

- H1. Favorable evaluations of instrumental EB attributes are positively associated with employee satisfaction.
- H2. Favorable evaluations of organizational culture as a symbolic EB attribute are positively associated with employee satisfaction.

2.3 Audience visibility in different evaluation contexts as a boundary condition

Social exchange theory helps explain why employer offerings matter to employees, but it is less well suited to explaining why employees may place greater emphasis on some EB attributes than others when reporting evaluations through different channels. Recent EB research likewise suggests that content attributes alone do not exhaust how employees react to employer-related information, because communication conditions, signaling environments and brand process features also shape how employer evaluations are formed and expressed (Höllig *et al.*, 2024; Kanwal and Van Hoyer, 2024). The instrumental-symbolic taxonomy remains useful for classifying EB content, but it does not by itself account for the communicative environment in which those evaluations are expressed (Höllig *et al.*, 2024). This issue is increasingly relevant because EB is no longer assessed only through organization-controlled communication or structured employee surveys. Employees now evaluate employers across multiple channels, including publicly visible employer-review platforms and confidential survey settings (Morgan and Chapman, 2024). We therefore propose an evaluation context, particularly audience visibility, as a plausible boundary condition that helps clarify where different theoretical explanations are more or less likely to hold (Leary and Kowalski, 1990; Busse *et al.*, 2017).

Impression-management theory provides a plausible mechanism for this pattern because employees do not express evaluations in a social vacuum. Impression-management concerns arise in both social media and self-report settings and are shaped by audience presence, self-presentation goals and the possibility that messages will be interpreted by others (Crawford *et al.*, 2019). In publicly visible contexts such as Glassdoor, employee evaluations are accessible to peers, prospective applicants, competitors, employers and other stakeholders. This audience-facing environment may foreground socially legible and identity-expressive attributes because they communicate organizational legitimacy, professional affiliation and collective values (Landers *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, perceived anonymity, platform design and employees' awareness of their possible influence on employer reputation can also affect what reviews contain and how informative they are (Landers *et al.*, 2019; Cloos, 2021). In confidential survey contexts, by contrast, external visibility is reduced and evaluations are less exposed to external judgment. Employees could therefore focus more directly on lived employment experience, potentially allowing instrumental attributes to receive greater relative emphasis (Hoppe *et al.*, 2022; Van Hoyer *et al.*, 2022).

3. Research method

3.1 Research design

To test the hypotheses and address the research question, this study employs a dual-source comparative design comprising publicly visible Glassdoor reviews (Study 1) and confidential employee survey responses (Study 2). The analysis estimates the same four EB attributes in both datasets: compensation and benefits, career opportunities and work–life balance as instrumental attributes and organizational culture as a symbolic attribute. This harmonized specification provides the clearest basis for descriptively comparing the relative ordering of attribute-satisfaction associations across the two evaluative contexts.

Because the studies use independent samples and different measurement systems – standardized platform ratings in Study 1 and validated research scales in Study 2 – the data are not pooled, and no formal moderation model is estimated. Instead, the models are estimated separately, and their standardized coefficients are interpreted within each dataset and compared descriptively rather than treated as statistically equivalent or significantly different across studies (Rita *et al.*, 2026).

3.2 Study 1: public and anonymous evaluations (Glassdoor reviews)

Study 1 used employee-generated Glassdoor reviews of financial service employers headquartered in Vietnam. A total of 3,442 reviews were collected using Open Web

Scraper, covering the period from 2015 to February 2025. After removing duplicate and irrelevant entries, 3,285 valid reviews remained for analysis. Each review included an overall employee satisfaction rating on a five-point scale and standardized attribute ratings provided by Glassdoor.

For the harmonized analysis, four Glassdoor attributes were retained: compensation and benefits, career opportunities, work–life balance and organizational culture. Overall employee satisfaction was used as the dependent variable. Data were analyzed using SPSS 22.0. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations were first examined, followed by ordinary least squares (OLS) regression predicting employee satisfaction from the four harmonized attributes. Because the dependent variable was measured on a five-point rating scale, an ordinal logistic regression using the same four predictors was also estimated as a robustness check.

3.3 Study 2: confidential evaluations (employee surveys)

Study 2 used a cross-sectional survey of full-time employees working in Vietnamese financial institutions. A structured questionnaire was used because the study aimed to collect standardized responses suitable for quantitative analysis, consistent with survey-based research practice (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). Participants were recruited through professional networks, and participation was voluntary and anonymous. A total of 801 questionnaires were returned; after screening for missing data and uniform responses, 507 valid cases were retained, yielding a usable rate of 63.3%. The sample was 66.9% female and 33.1% male; 51.9% of respondents were under 30 years of age and the average organizational tenure was 4.3 years. These characteristics are broadly consistent with the demographic profile of Vietnam's financial-service workforce (General Statistics Office, 2024).

The constructs in Study 2 were measured using established scales, adapted to the Vietnamese context through a rigorous translation and back-translation procedure and a pilot study ($n = 38$). All items were assessed on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). EB attributes were adapted from measurement items developed by Nanjundeswaraswamy *et al.* (2025). Employee satisfaction was measured using an eight-item scale, incorporating Hackman and Oldham's (1975) seven-item General Satisfaction Scale and one additional item – “*The work I do on this job is very meaningful to me*” – reflecting both hedonic and purposeful evaluations of work (Judge *et al.*, 2017; Rothausen and Henderson, 2019). All eight items were retained as indicators of a single satisfaction construct.

Study 2 data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0. Principal component analysis and Cronbach's alpha were then used to assess the dimensionality and reliability. Following common measurement-assessment practice, items with substantial cross-loadings were removed and retained constructs were evaluated using factor loadings and reliability coefficients (Hair *et al.*, 2021). Composite scores were calculated by averaging the retained items for each construct. The final harmonized regression model predicted employee satisfaction using compensation and benefits, career opportunities, work–life balance and organizational culture.

4. Findings

4.1 Descriptive overview and measurement assessment

The descriptive results indicate generally positive employee evaluations in both studies. In Study 1, based on 3,285 valid Glassdoor reviews, the average rating for overall employee satisfaction was 3.93 (standard deviation (SD) = 0.93). Among the four harmonized attributes, career opportunities received the highest mean rating ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.98$), followed by organizational culture ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.07$), compensation and benefits ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.08$) and work–life balance ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.25$).

In Study 2, based on 507 confidential employee survey responses, employee satisfaction and organizational culture had the highest mean scores ($M = 3.72$ for both), followed by

work–life balance ($M = 3.66$), career opportunities ($M = 3.63$) and compensation and benefits ($M = 3.58$). Bivariate correlations provided initial support for the expected relationships, as all four employer-brand attributes were positively correlated with employee satisfaction, with coefficients ranging from 0.435 to 0.570.

Table 1 reports the measurement items, factor loadings and reliability results for the Study 2 survey constructs. The retained items for the four EB attributes showed acceptable factor loadings, ranging from 0.696 to 0.875. Cronbach’s alpha values ranged from 0.771 to 0.793 for the employer-brand attributes, while employee satisfaction had a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.869. These results indicate acceptable measurement properties and support the use of composite scores in the regression analysis.

4.2 Harmonized regression results

Table 2 presents the harmonized OLS results for the two studies. In Study 1, the publicly visible review model explained 38.0% of the variance in employee satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.380$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.379$), with a statistically significant model fit, $F = 214.582$, $p < 0.001$. All four harmonized attributes were positively and significantly associated with employee satisfaction.

Table 1. Measurement items, factor loadings and reliability results for Study 2

Constructs	Items	Factor loadings	Cronbach’s alpha
Compensation and benefits	I receive an adequate compensation and benefits package	0.788	0.793
	I am financially rewarded for additional work	0.731	
	I am recognized for exceptional work	0.805	
	The compensation and benefits package are designed to meet my personal needs	0.696	
Career opportunities	My employer provides a springboard for my future career opportunities	0.781	0.771
	Management helps me identify internal job opportunities that match my interests	0.769	
	I have opportunities to perform high-profile assignments based on my competencies	0.712	
	I can communicate openly and directly about my career aspirations	0.700	
Organizational culture	Management welcomes my opinions and suggestions	0.802	0.771
	New ideas are usually accepted and supported for implementation	0.800	
Work–life balance	Good leadership is demonstrated in the organization	0.740	0.779
	I have the opportunity to maintain work–life balance	0.875	
	My employer offers flexible working conditions	0.864	
Employee satisfaction	I feel a great sense of personal satisfaction when I do this job well	0.779	0.869
	I feel bad and unhappy when I discover that I have performed poorly on this job	0.770	
	The work I do on this job is very meaningful to me	0.724	
	My opinion of myself goes up when I do this job well	0.722	
	Generally speaking, I am very satisfied with this job	0.716	
	My own feelings generally are not affected much one way or the other by how well I do on this job	0.694	
	I frequently think of quitting this job	0.691	
	I am generally satisfied with the kind of work I do in this job	0.681	

Note(s): Study 2 used 507 confidential employee survey responses. Factor loadings are from principal component analysis. Cronbach’s alpha values are shown for each construct. Negatively worded employee-satisfaction items were reverse coded where appropriate before composite scores were calculated

Source(s): Author’s own work

Table 2. Harmonized OLS results across publicly visible and confidential evaluation contexts

Employer brand attribute	Study 1: Visible public reviews β	Study 2: Confidential surveys β
Compensation and benefits	0.158***	0.349***
Career opportunities	0.217***	0.296***
Work–life balance	0.110***	0.185***
Organizational culture	0.301***	0.254***
R^2	0.380	0.592
Adjusted R^2	0.379	0.589
F-statistic	214.582***	181.946***

Note(s): Study 1 used 3,285 publicly visible Glassdoor reviews; Study 2 used 507 confidential employee survey responses. Both models used the same four predictors: compensation and benefits, career opportunities, work–life balance and organizational culture. Standardized coefficients are compared descriptively across studies. *** $p < 0.001$

Source(s): Author's own work

Organizational culture had the largest standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.301$, $p < 0.001$), followed by career opportunities ($\beta = 0.217$, $p < 0.001$), compensation and benefits ($\beta = 0.158$, $p < 0.001$) and work–life balance ($\beta = 0.110$, $p < 0.001$). The ordinal logistic robustness check using the same four predictors produces the same substantive conclusion, indicating that the Study 1 results were not dependent on the use of OLS regression.

In Study 2, the confidential survey model explained 59.2% of the variance in employee satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.592$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.589$), with a statistically significant model fit, $F = 181.946$, $p < 0.001$. Again, all four attributes were positively and significantly associated with employee satisfaction. Compensation and benefits had the largest standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.349$, $p < 0.001$), followed by career opportunities ($\beta = 0.296$, $p < 0.001$), organizational culture ($\beta = 0.254$, $p < 0.001$) and work–life balance ($\beta = 0.185$, $p < 0.001$).

Taken together, the results support H1, as the three instrumental attributes, compensation and benefits, career opportunities and work–life balance, were positively associated with employee satisfaction in both studies. The results also support H2, as organizational culture was positively associated with employee satisfaction in both studies.

4.3 Cross-context interpretation

The harmonized findings show both convergence and descriptive divergence across the two evaluative contexts. The convergence lies in the positive and significant associations of all four attributes with employee satisfaction in both studies. This indicates that compensation and benefits, career opportunities, work–life balance and organizational culture constitute a common core of employer value across publicly visible and confidential evaluations.

The divergence lies in the relative ordering of the attributes. In the publicly visible review context, organizational culture ranked first, followed by career opportunities, compensation and benefits and work–life balance. In the confidential survey context, compensation and benefits ranked first, followed by career opportunities, organizational culture and work–life balance. The clearest descriptive difference concerns organizational culture and compensation and benefits. Organizational culture was most prominent in the public review model but ranked third in the confidential survey model. Compensation and benefits showed the opposite pattern, ranking third in the public review model but first in the confidential survey model. Career opportunities remained comparatively important in both contexts, while work–life balance had the smallest standardized coefficient in both models.

Within the instrumental-symbolic framework, this pattern is consistent with the possibility that publicly visible evaluations give relatively greater emphasis to organizational culture as an

externally communicable and identity-expressive attribute. Confidential evaluations, by contrast, may give greater prominence to instrumental attributes connected to employees' personal employment utility, particularly compensation and benefits and career opportunities. However, because the two models were estimated using independent samples and non-identical measurement instruments, the observed differences do not constitute a formal test of coefficient differences or moderation. Rather, they provide descriptive evidence consistent with audience visibility under a plausible boundary condition for future research.

5. Discussion of findings

5.1 Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to the EB literature by advancing a context-sensitive explanation of how EB attributes are associated with employee satisfaction. Existing research has largely emphasized instrumental and symbolic content attributes while giving less attention to the evaluative conditions under which employees express those perceptions. The present study extends that literature by combining the instrumental-symbolic framework with social exchange theory and impression management theory, thereby distinguishing between why employer attributes matter and how their relative importance may shift across contexts. Social exchange theory accounts for the positive association between valued employer attributes and employee satisfaction, whereas impression management theory helps explain why employees may emphasize different attributes when their evaluations are expressed under different audience conditions (Bolino *et al.*, 2008; Crawford *et al.*, 2019). Rather than treating instrumental and symbolic EB attributes as predictors with fixed importance, the findings suggest that common employer attributes can remain relevant across contexts while occupying different relative positions within employees' expressed evaluations.

5.1.1 Audience visibility as a plausible boundary condition in the EB attribute-employee satisfaction relationship. The first and central contribution is to examine audience visibility as a plausible boundary condition in the relationship between EB attributes and employee satisfaction (Busse *et al.*, 2017). Prior research using the instrumental-symbolic framework has primarily distinguished employer attributes according to the type of value they provide, separating objective and utilitarian attributes from subjective and identity-relevant symbolic attributes (Lievens and Highhouse, 2003). However, newer work shows that employer evaluations are increasingly expressed through third-party review platforms outside direct organizational control, making the communicative setting itself more theoretically consequential (Dabirian *et al.*, 2017; Höllig *et al.*, 2024, 2025).

In Study 1, based on publicly visible Glassdoor reviews, organizational culture has the largest standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.301$), followed by career opportunities ($\beta = 0.217$), compensation and benefits ($\beta = 0.158$) and work-life balance ($\beta = 0.110$). This pattern is consistent with the possibility that an audience-facing evaluation environment gives relatively greater prominence to organizational culture because public employer reviews do not merely report work conditions; they also communicate socially legible meanings about the organization's character, identity and prestige. That interpretation is reinforced by large-scale review-platform evidence showing that, although instrumental content is often more prevalent in employer reviews, symbolic, personal and emotional content is more strongly associated with favorability ratings (Höllig *et al.*, 2024; Morgan and Chapman, 2024). It is also consistent with broader self-presentation research showing that visibility, persistence and audience composition shape what people choose to express in public communicative environments (Blunden and Brodsky, 2024). In this sense, organizational culture may be especially prominent in public reviews because it allows employees to communicate not only whether the employer is satisfactory but also what kind of organization it is to be affiliated with (Landers *et al.*, 2019).

Study 2 reveals a different descriptive ordering in the confidential survey setting. Compensation and benefit attributes had the largest standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.349$),

followed by career opportunities ($\beta = 0.296$), organizational culture ($\beta = 0.254$) and work–life balance ($\beta = 0.185$). This suggests that when evaluations are confidential and exposure to an external audience is reduced, employees can give relatively greater prominence to attributes connected to personal employment utility, economic security and future career prospects. This interpretation is consistent with prior EB research showing the importance of instrumental employer value for employee attitudes and retention, particularly in competitive labor-market environments (Hoppe *et al.*, 2022; Van Hoya *et al.*, 2022; Caputo *et al.*, 2023).

This does not imply that symbolic attributes matter only in public evaluations or that instrumental attributes matter only in confidential evaluations; rather, what appears to vary is the relative ordering of shared attributes due to audience visibility. This interpretation is consistent with impression-management research showing that audience configuration matters and that visible stakeholders can affect how individuals present, justify and emphasize their evaluations (Bolino *et al.*, 2008; Crawford *et al.*, 2019). It also aligns with evidence from employer-review-platform research showing that review behavior is shaped by the social and technical features of the communicative environment. Perceived anonymity affects informativeness, platform design influences average review scores and employees' awareness of their impact on employer reputation can shape what they disclose (Cloos, 2021; Blunden and Brodsky, 2024). Public reviews are consequential enough to induce firm responses, including improvements in workplace practices and additional disclosure after firms are reviewed on Glassdoor (Dube and Zhu, 2021). These findings make it theoretically plausible that visible stakeholder audiences affect not whether employees value instrumental and symbolic attributes at all, but which of those shared attributes they emphasize most strongly when rendering evaluations.

However, because the two studies use independent samples and non-identical measurement instruments, the present findings should be interpreted as theory-building descriptive evidence rather than as a formal test of moderation. Audience visibility is therefore proposed as a plausible boundary condition for future testing and not as a definitively established moderating effect.

5.1.2 Methodological contribution: a dual-source approach to EB evaluation. The second contribution concerns how EB researchers interpret evidence from different employee-data environments. By estimating the same four-attribute model using both publicly visible employer reviews and confidential employee surveys, the study shows both convergence and divergence across the two sources. The convergence is substantively important: compensation and benefits, career opportunities, work–life balance and organizational culture were all positively associated with employee satisfaction in both studies. This pattern is consistent with broader employee-focused EB research showing that EB attributes are meaningfully related to employee reactions, while also confirming that core EB dimensions remain relevant across different data environments (Bharadwaj *et al.*, 2022; Davies *et al.*, 2018). The divergence is equally important. The relative ordering of the four attributes differs across the public-review and confidential-survey contexts, suggesting that these sources should not be treated as interchangeable measures of the same evaluative process.

This makes the dual-source comparative design valuable, as it demonstrates that common positive relationships can coexist with different descriptive patterns across data environments. Public employer-review data capture voluntary, employee-generated judgments expressed in an audience-facing setting increasingly shaped by review sites and electronic word of mouth. Confidential survey data, by contrast, allow researchers to assess theory-grounded EB constructs under more structured and private conditions. Used together, the two sources provide complementary rather than redundant evidence. By integrating these two sources, the study responds to calls for methodological diversification and shows how public and confidential data can provide complementary insights into employee experience (Dabirian *et al.*, 2017; Landers *et al.*, 2019; Tran *et al.*, 2024). Accordingly, methodological choices are not neutral in EB research. Each source may reveal a different facet of employer evaluation rather than simply reproducing the same phenomenon through a different instrument.

The value of the dual-source design lies not in claiming that the two studies produce statistically equivalent estimates, but in showing how common positive relationships can coexist with different descriptive patterns across data environments (Rita *et al.*, 2026).

5.1.3 Contextual extension in Vietnam's financial services sector. The third contribution is to extend empirical EB research to Vietnam's financial service sector, an emerging-market employment context that remains comparatively underrepresented in the literature. The positive associations of all four harmonized attributes across both studies indicate that both instrumental and symbolic forms of employer value are relevant in this setting. It also aligns with evidence from Vietnam's commercial banking context, where HR-related factors have been linked to employees' organizational commitment (Nguyen *et al.*, 2014).

The consistently smaller coefficient for work-life balance in both contexts may reflect some of the structural characteristics of the industry, which is frequently associated with high performance demands, long working hours and substantial work pressure. Under such conditions, work-life balance can remain positively related to satisfaction while being less differentiating than compensation, career progression or organizational culture, especially where long-hours norms are widely normalized within the sector (Maharani and Tamara, 2024; Mishra *et al.*, 2025).

Altogether, the findings suggest that employee satisfaction is not driven by a single category of employer value. Instrumental and symbolic attributes remain relevant simultaneously, while their relative importance may vary across evaluative environments and employment settings. The contribution is therefore not a revision of the instrumental-symbolic taxonomy but an extension of context-contingent EB research through the audience visibility axis, supported by a dual-source design and evidence from an underrepresented emerging-market sector.

5.2 Managerial implications

The findings offer guidance for organizations, particularly in talent-constrained emerging markets. First, the findings indicate that compensation and benefits, career opportunities, work-life balance and organizational culture all contribute positively to employee satisfaction across both evaluative contexts. Organizations should therefore manage these attributes as an interconnected core of the employee value proposition rather than as isolated HR practices. In the confidential survey setting, compensation and benefits and career opportunities had the largest standardized coefficients, highlighting the importance of transparent reward systems credible career pathways and clearly communicated advancement opportunities. Organizations seeking to strengthen internal satisfaction should therefore prioritize compensation fairness, career progression and sustainable working conditions as core elements of their EB strategy (Davies *et al.*, 2018; Anh *et al.*, 2019).

Second, the prominence of organizational culture in the public review model underscores the importance of symbolic reputation management. Organizations should strengthen leadership visibility, maintain transparent communication and actively monitor employer-review platforms such as Glassdoor to understand how employees publicly evaluate culture, ethics and managerial credibility (Kanwal and Van Hoya, 2024; Rita *et al.*, 2026). Because publicly visible evaluations may foreground socially legible and identity-expressive aspects of employer value, organizations should ensure that external EB narratives remain credible and aligned with employees' lived experiences. Embedding ethical governance and cultural consistency into recruitment, onboarding, internal communication and EB messaging can further strengthen the symbolic value of the EB (Van Hoya *et al.*, 2013; Nguyen, 2025).

Third, the findings suggest that EB should be managed with attention to differences between evaluative environments. In public-facing contexts, organizations should prioritize review-response strategies, leadership visibility, symbolic EB communication and reputation monitoring to reinforce legitimacy and trust. In confidential evaluative contexts, the harmonized results indicate comparatively greater prominence for compensation and career

opportunities. HR leaders should therefore complement external reputation management efforts with regular confidential employee surveys, internal feedback systems, employee-support mechanisms and sustained investment in compensation and career development practices. This can help ensure alignment between the external employer image and the internal employee experience.

Public reviews and confidential surveys should therefore be used as complementary diagnostic tools rather than as interchangeable measures. Public platforms reveal the aspects of employment that employees choose to communicate to an external audience, whereas confidential surveys provide structured information about employees' internal experiences. Differences between the two sources should be investigated rather than assumed to reflect error or inconsistency.

6. Limitations and conclusion

6.1 Limitations

Despite its theoretical and methodological contributions, this study has several limitations. First, Study 1 relies on crowdsourced Glassdoor reviews, which are subject to self-selection and response bias. Online reviewers may systematically differ from the broader employee population and may represent more extreme levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Marinescu *et al.*, 2021). Because only English-language reviews were retained, the sample may also overrepresent highly educated, internationally oriented or professionally mobile employees. Future research should incorporate local-language employer-review platforms to capture a broader cross-section of the workforce (Dabirian *et al.*, 2017; Höllig *et al.*, 2024, 2025).

Second, although the dual-source design allows a descriptive comparison between publicly visible and confidential evaluations, the two studies use independent samples and non-identical measurement instruments. The harmonized models therefore compare the relative ordering of coefficients rather than formally testing coefficient differences, interaction effects or moderation. Future research should use identical measures within the same sample, matched public and confidential data, experimental evaluation framing or multi-group models that permit direct statistical comparison.

Third, the study is based on cross-sectional and same-source data within each study. In Study 1, attribute ratings and overall satisfaction were reported within the same Glassdoor review; in Study 2, EB attributes and satisfaction were measured in the same survey. The findings therefore support associations rather than causal conclusions. Longitudinal, time-lagged or experimental designs would help clarify the direction of relationships between EB attributes and employee satisfaction.

6.2 Conclusion

This research advances a context-dependent understanding of EB by examining how instrumental and symbolic EB attributes are associated with employee satisfaction across evaluative contexts. Drawing on social exchange theory as an explanatory lens, the study shows that both types of attributes operate as valued employer offerings: instrumental attributes provide functional and economic value, whereas symbolic attributes provide socio-emotional, reputational and meaning-based value. Across both datasets, compensation and benefits, career opportunities, work-life balance and organizational culture are positively associated with employee satisfaction, indicating a common core of employer value across publicly visible and confidential evaluations.

Their relative ordering nevertheless differs descriptively across the two settings. Organizational culture has the largest standardized coefficient in the publicly visible review model, whereas compensation and benefits and career opportunities occupy the leading positions in the confidential survey model. The findings do not establish that audience

visibility moderates these relationships or that public evaluations are uniformly symbolic while confidential evaluations are uniformly instrumental. Rather, they are consistent with audience visibility as a plausible boundary condition that should be formally tested in future research.

By combining the instrumental-symbolic framework with social exchange theory and impression management theory, this study contributes to a more context-sensitive account of EB. Its principal contribution is to extend prior context-contingent EB research by introducing audience visibility as an additional evaluative axis. The dual-source design further shows that public employer reviews and confidential surveys provide complementary rather than interchangeable representations of employee evaluation.

It also extends EB research beyond its predominantly Western empirical foundations by examining Vietnam's financial-service sector. In emerging economies such as Vietnam, effective EB management requires more than an attractive external image. Organizations must align symbolic claims about organizational culture with credible instrumental practices related to compensation, career opportunities and work-life balance. Therefore, a sustainable EB depends on consistency between what organizations communicate publicly and what employees experience internally.

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Corresponding author

Cam Tu Tran can be contacted at: tutc@neu.edu.vn