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Author(s)	Maija Uoti	Student number	504958
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Supervisor(s)	Ph.D. Eriikka Paavilainen-Mäntymäki Ph.D. Johanna Raitis		

Abstract

Multinational organisations (MNEs) are facing increasing international competition for talent, which highlights the significance of the employer brand. Applicant reactions towards selection procedures have multiple potential consequences for the organisation, which makes a case for investing in fair selection practices. Explanation-provision has been found to be one of the most cost-efficient tools to influence applicant reactions, yet only a handful of studies have analysed the contents of employment rejection letters. The purpose of this study was to examine explanation-provision in authentic employment rejection letters to non-interviewed external job applicants from the perspective of the employer brand, and the purpose was approached through three research questions:

1. How is explanation-provision in employment rejection letters connected to the employer brand?
2. What proportion of rejection letters to non-interviewed external job applicants contains one or more explanations for the negative selection decision?
3. What patterns emerge in the context of explanation-provision in rejection letters to non-interviewed external job applicants?

For the first question, a brief literature review on relevant theories was conducted, while the two others were answered based on empirical data. Directed qualitative content analysis was used to study 106 employment rejection letters from 84 different multinational organisations to Finnish applicants, and the primary categorisations centred around excuses, justifications, and explanation adequacy.

By combining different theories, it was speculated that explanation-provision in rejection letters might be connected to the employer brand through applicants' justice expectations and attributional processes. The empirical data revealed that while most rejection letters offered at least one explanation for the negative hire decision, the most commonly offered reason was a generic description of a large, and often also qualified, applicant pool. The letters were generally sensitive in their style, but the explanations in them were mostly low in informational value, and a significant number of the letters had been sent using an organisational no-reply e-mail address. These findings suggest that while many MNEs appear to provide explanations in their rejection letters to non-interviewed external applicants, it is possible that the explanations may be lacking in adequacy. If enough rejected applicants are unhappy with the contents of their rejection letter, the potential consequences for the employer brand may not be favourable.

Key words	applicant reactions, rejection letter, employer brand, content analysis, explanations
Further information	



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Tiivistelmä

Monikansalliset yritykset käyvät kiristyvää, kansainvälistä kilpailua osaavista työntekijöistä, mikä alleviivaa työnantajabrändin merkitystä. Sillä, kuinka työnhakijat reagoivat valintaprosesseihin, on monia potentiaalisia seurauksia organisaatiolle, mikä puoltaa investointeja oikeudenmukaisiin organisaatiokäytäntöihin. Selitysten tarjoamista on kutsuttu yhdeksi kustannustehokkaimmista työkaluista, kun pyritään vaikuttamaan työnhakijoiden reaktioihin, mutta silti vain kourallinen tutkimuksia on analysoinut todellisten hylkäyskirjeiden sisältöä. Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli selvittää, kuinka selityksiä tarjotaan hylkäyskirjeissä haastattelemattomille ulkoisille työnhakijoille työnantajabrändin näkökulmasta, ja tavoite oli jaettu kolmeen tutkimuskysymykseen:

1. Kuinka selitysten tarjoaminen työnhakijoiden hylkäyskirjeissä on yhteydessä työnantajabrändiin?
2. Kuinka suuri osa haastattelemattomille ulkoisille työnhakijoille suunnatuista hylkäyskirjeistä sisältää yhden tai useamman selityksen valintapäätökselle?
3. Mitä kaavoja nousee esiin haastattelemattomille ulkoisille työnhakijoille suunnatuissa hylkäyskirjeissä selitysten tarjoamiseen liittyen?

Ensimmäiseen tutkimuskysymykseen vastattiin työnhakijoiden reaktioihin kohdistuvalla kirjallisuuskatsauksella, kun taas kahteen muuhun vastattiin empiirisen aineiston kautta. Ohjattua laadullista sisällönanalyysia käytettiin analysoimaan 106 hylkäyskirjettä, jotka oli 84 monikansallisen yrityksen toimesta lähetetty suomalaisille työnhakijoille. Kategorisointi keskittyi selitystyyppeihin ja selitysten adekvaattisuuteen liittyvien käsitteiden ympärille.

Eri teorioita yhdistelemällä spekulointiin, että hylkäyskirjeiden selitykset ovat yhteydessä työnantajabrändiin työnhakijoiden oikeudenmukaisuusodotusten ja attribuutioprosessien kautta. Empiirinen aineisto paljasti, että vaikka suurin osa hylkäyskirjeistä sisälsi ainakin yhden selityksen kielteiselle valintapäätökselle, yleisimmin tarjottu selitys oli geneerinen kuvaus hakijoiden määrään, ja usein myös laatuun, liittyen. Kirjeet olivat yleisesti rakenteeltaan sensitiivisiä, mutta niiden sisältämät selitykset olivat informaatioarvoltaan köyhiä, ja lisäksi merkittävä osa kirjeistä oli lähetetty no-reply-sähköpostiosoitteen kautta. Nämä löydökset viittaavat siihen, että vaikka useat monikansalliset yritykset vaikuttavat tarjoavan selityksiä hylkäyskirjeissään haastattelemattomille ulkoisille työnhakijoille, on mahdollista, että selitysten koettu adekvaattisuus on riittämätöntä. Mikäli tarpeeksi moni torjuttu työnhakija kokee tyytymättömyyttä hylkäyskirjeen rakennetta kohtaan, mahdolliset seuraukset työnantajabrändille eivät välttämättä ole myönteisiä.

Asiasanat	Hylkäyskirje, työnantajabrändi, selitykset, sisällönanalyysi, hakijakokemus
Muita tietoja	

EXPLANATIONS IN REJECTION LETTERS TO NON-INTERVIEWED EXTERNAL APPLICANTS

Employer brand perspective and qualitative content analysis

Master's Thesis
in International Business

Author:
Maija Uoti

Supervisors:
Ph.D. Eriikka Paavilainen-Mäntymäki
Ph.D. Johanna Raitis

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Turku

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CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION.....	5
1.1	Background of the study.....	5
1.2	Purpose and structure of the study	7
2	APPLICANT REACTIONS AND THE EMPLOYER BRAND	12
2.1	The significance of the employer brand	12
2.2	Applicant reactions to selection procedures	14
3	EXPLAINING REJECTION.....	20
3.1	Applicant rejection – bad news and risk of conflict	20
3.2	Explanations for bad news	23
3.2.1	<i>Explanation type</i>	23
3.2.2	<i>Explanation adequacy</i>	26
4	RESEARCH DESIGN OF THE EMPIRICAL STUDY	31
4.1	Research approach and method.....	31
4.2	Data collection.....	32
4.3	Data analysis.....	35
5	EMPIRICAL FINDINGS.....	37
5.1	Prevalence of explanation-provision in employment rejection letters	37
5.2	Explanation types in employment rejection letters	38
5.3	Explanation adequacy in employment rejection letters.....	40
6	CONCLUSIONS	46
6.1	Explanation-provision in employment rejection letters	46
6.2	Practical implications	50
6.3	Theoretical contribution	51
6.4	Evaluation of the study.....	53
7	SUMMARY	55
8	REFERENCES.....	57

FIGURES

Figure 1	Structural framework of the study.....	10
Figure 2	Types of explanations.....	24
Figure 3	Explanation adequacy.....	27
Figure 4	Procedural sequence of directed qualitative content analysis.....	35
Figure 5	The proportions of data containing or lacking explanations.....	37
Figure 6	Connection between explanations and the employer brand	46
Figure 7	Explanation-provision in the data.....	47

TABLES

Table 1	Criteria for the participants and the data.....	33
Table 2	Features of the data.....	34
Table 3	Frequencies of explanation types.....	39
Table 4	Frequencies of adequacy dimensions.....	41
Table 5	Characteristics related to refusal.....	44

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

The changing demographics in first-world countries – such as lower birth rates followed by a declining and aging working population (Wilden, Gudergan & Lings 2010, 56), ”pickier workforce” (Gerdes 2006), and the growing preference towards job mobility and more flexible careers (Artuhur & Rousseau 1996) – have resulted in a global talent shortage (ManpowerGroup 2014) and increasing, international competition for talent amongst multinational enterprises (MNEs; Mellahi & Collings 2010, 144). As Sam Palmisano (2006, 133), President and CEO of IBM, described it: “The single most important challenge in shifting to globally integrated enterprises – and the consideration driving most business decisions today – will be securing a supply of high-value skills”. Accordingly, MNEs are increasingly interested in activities that support their reputation as “a distinct and desirable employer” (Lievens, Van Hove & Anseel 2007, 48; Mandal 2014, 156) – in essence, their employer brand.

The Internet has become the primary medium for organisational recruitment and selection (McCarthy, Bauer, Truxillo, Anderson, Costa & Ahmed 2017, 1702–1703), but it also creates impersonal processes, and job seekers report feeling more ”like a number” than a valued applicant (Boswell, Roehling, LePine & Moynihan 2003, 33). Applicants make an investment of their time and effort when they craft and submit job applications, and they expect a fair return: ”timely, accurate and transparent communication” (Carpenter 2013, 203). The employment rejection letter can be seen as an integral part of this communication. Multiple studies from the last decades have examined the relationship between selection procedures and applicant reactions (see, for example, Hausknecht, Day & Thomas 2004), and perceived fairness (i.e. how justly a person feels they are treated) has been widely recognised as a key determinant (see, for example, Truxillo, Steiner & Gilliland 2004). Unfairness perceptions may lead to many unfavourable outcomes such as decreased reapplications and recommendations (Bauer et al. 2006, 616), disgruntled applicants dissuading others from seeking employment with the organisation (Smither, Reilly, Millsap, Pearlman & Stoffey 1993, 60), and people having both lower motivation to accept job offers and lower work-performance (Konradt, Garbers, Böge, Erdogan & Bauer 2017, 133).

Rejected applicants do not stop existing after the selection process has finished; their experiences shape their ideas and actions long after their names have been crossed off the list, and not simply as job seekers but as consumers, customers, and public influencers, too. Naturally, neither the employer brand of an organisation nor the applicant experience of a job seeker is determined by one rejection letter alone, but big pictures are built from smaller details – and applicants expect warm and respectful treatment during the selection process (Schreurs, Deros, Proost, Notelaers & De Witte 2008, 174). One of the few cost-effective tools available to organisations for improving applicant reactions is also one of the most consistently research-proven strategies: providing explanations for selection procedures (Truxillo, Bodner, Bertolino, Bauer & Yonce 2009, 14). Limaye (2001, 103) argued that since opportunity costs incur to rejected job applicants, employers are under an ethical obligation to compensate by providing explanations. It is an effective way of affecting applicants' perceptions of fairness and consequently of the organisation itself (Truxillo et al. 2009, 14), and its importance could be expected to grow as the use of novel staffing technologies increases.

Over the course of years, recruitment and selection research has increased tremendously and turned more practice-oriented, yet much still remains to be done before the so-called research-practice gaps are closed (Breaugh & Starke 2000). Ployhart (2006, 862–869) implied that organisational decision makers have failed to grasp the value of staffing as a strategic mechanism for competitive advantage. Although better financial performance has been recorded in companies where Human Resources (HR) professionals read academic research literature (Terpstra & Rozell 1997), in a study by Rynes, Brown, and Colbert (2002, X, 93, 100), the overwhelming majority of HR practitioners confessed to never reading any. If this reflects a widespread failure to study – and possibly implement – appropriate, research-backed practices, it may put many organisations at a competitive disadvantage. The employment rejection letter is one of the most common forms of every-day organisational mass-communication (Shaw 2000, 32), and research-supported guidelines should be followed by the people working in recruitment and selection (Waung & Brice 2007, 2069) – but when it comes to explanations in employment rejection letters, are they? And what might be the implications for the employer brand?

1.2 Purpose and structure of the study

The purpose of this study is to *examine explanation-provision in employment rejection letters to non-interviewed external applicants from the perspective of the employer brand*. Explanation-provision has consistently been shown to be an effective strategy to improve applicant reactions in prescriptive laboratory studies, but the practical suggestions have often been platitudes (e.g. treat people with respect; Ryan & Huth 2008, 120), and the topic has not enjoyed much research coverage descriptively (Ryan & Ployhart 2000, 601). Furthermore, as Deveci and Pasha-Zaidi (2017, 429) pointed out, the few descriptive studies on rejection letters are relatively old and from before the modern Internet era. That is why this study attempts to shed light on how explanations are used in contemporary employment rejection letters and how they may be connected to the employer brand. The research purpose is approached through the following research questions:

- 1) *How is explanation-provision in employment rejection letters connected to the employer brand?*
- 2) *What proportion of rejection letters to non-interviewed external job applicants contains one or more explanations for the negative selection decision?*
- 3) *What patterns emerge in the context of explanation-provision in rejection letters to non-interviewed external job applicants?*

Previous research has not clearly separated explanations for decisions and explanations for processes (Horvath, Ryan & Stierwalt 2000, 312–312), but the focus in this study is primarily on explanations for negative selection decisions. In addition, explanation-provision is defined as providing someone with an explanation. Figure 1 (page 10) portrays the structural framework of this study, with condensed versions of the research questions.

Efforts to unfold potential discrepancies between research-backed practical recommendations and actual strategies of the real world might help support trialling and implementing new, and potentially more effective, recruitment practices in organisations while also making theoretical contributions. There are differences in recruitment and selection procedures across different countries (Ryan, McFarland, Baron & Page 1999, 386), but staffing is a globally observable phenomenon. Similarly, justice is a universal concern, even if it may operationalise in different ways across cultures (Pillai, Williams & Tan 2001, 314).

This study focuses on e-mail rejection letters from multinational organisations to external job applicants in the culturally low-context country of Finland, and this is for the following reasons: First, e-mail as a communication channel was chosen for its primary status in business communication (McCarthy, et al. 2017, 1702–1703); the rejection of unsuccessful job applicants is widely conducted through this medium. Second, the role of staffing as a key source of competitive advantage, and as a major challenge, is only underlined for organisations operating at the international level (see, for example, Briscoe, Schuler & Tarique 2012, 31–32). Furthermore, MNEs, which are relatively large even if they do vary in size and scope (Navaretti & Venables 2006, 1–2), are more involved than small- and medium-size organisations in adopting strategies that recognize employee talent-maximisation as a source of sustained competitive advantage (Al Ariss, Cascio & Pauwe 2014, 174). The definition of MNEs in this study is the one Kostova and Zaheer (1999, 65) called the most accepted in the field: “a specific organizational form that comprises entities in two or more countries, regardless of legal forms and fields of activity of those entities, which operate under a system of decision-making permitting coherent policies and common strategy through one or more decision-making centres, in which the entities are so linked, by ownership or otherwise, that one or more of them may be able to exercise a significant influence over the activities of the others, and in particular, to share knowledge, resources, and responsibilities with others” (Ghoshal & Westney 1993, 4).

Third, different recruitment sources can be categorised into internal sources (such as internships, rehires, and in-house notices), external sources (typically job advertisements and recruitment agencies), and walk-ins (such as unsolicited applications) (Moser 2005, 189). While organisations vary in their preference of different recruitment sources (see, for example, Schwan & Soeters 1994), this study focuses specifically on the external labour market, since the selection process is often the first point of contact for external applicants (Rao 2010, 45), who are most often unfamiliar with the organisation (Searle & Billsberry 2011, 70). This early contact stage might be especially pivotal in the forming of an overall perception of the employer (Lind 2001; Cable & Turban 2001).

Fourth, non-interviewed applicants refer to people who have not, after submitting their job application, taken part in any kind of official, real-time, interpersonal job-interview in relation to it. Since a job interview is considered to be a central part of regular selection procedures (Viswesvaran & Ones 2017, 460), this could be viewed as

a meaningful separating line between two groups of external applicants one of which holds more procedural information than the other. Also, since in many selection processes the majority of job applications are refused without a job interview (Meier 2014), the focus of this study is, in this aspect, on the most common type of rejected job applicant.

Fifth, the dimension of collectivism-individualism has been the most popular lens for cultural diversity in cross-cultural studies of communication. Cultures classified as more collectivistic (e.g. in Asia, Africa, and South America) tend to put higher importance on the goals and interests of groups over those of the individual, whereas the opposite is true for more individualistic cultures (e.g. in the USA, Australia, the UK, and the Nordic countries). (Gudykunst & Lee 2003, 9–11.) Collectivistic cultures are also more inclined to high-context communication as opposed to low-context communication that predominates in individualistic cultures (Gudykunst & Lee 2003, 18). Low-context communication places a greater emphasis on the explicit and coded form of information, while high-context communication relies more on the physical context and internalised information (Hall 1976, 70, 79). In other words, high-context communication is more indirect and harmony seeking than its direct, low-context counterpart, and albeit both of them exist in all cultures, one tends to predominate (Robinson 2004, 114). People representing low-context cultures expect reasonable explanations (Nishimura, Nevgi & Tella 2008, 785), while in high-context cultures explanations may sometimes be perceived as offensive (Miyaozono, cited in Barešová 2008, 75), and therefore "less explanation and more apology" (Mizutani & Mizutani 1987, 49) is preferred. Barešová (2008, 110) compared American and Japanese employment rejection letters and found that while 61% of the American letters offered explanations, the similar figure for the Japanese letters was only 19%.

Finland was chosen as the focal low-context environment for convenience reasons. Although the country has quite consistently been categorized as a low-context culture (see, for example, Nurmi 1990, 101; Würtz 2005, 282; Tanova & Nadiri 2010, 190), some have argued that the culture might actually be a curious mixture of Western European values and Asian communication style (Lewis 2005, 67). Nevertheless, Nishimura et al. (2008, 788) saw that even if the Finnish communication style has been higher-context in the past, it is becoming increasingly low-context, especially amongst younger generations. Additionally, Lewis (2005, 67) noted that the Finnish communication style goes against the Asian way of appreciating diplomacy over truth,

being in line with those of Western low-context cultures where messages are expected to be clear, open, and sincere.

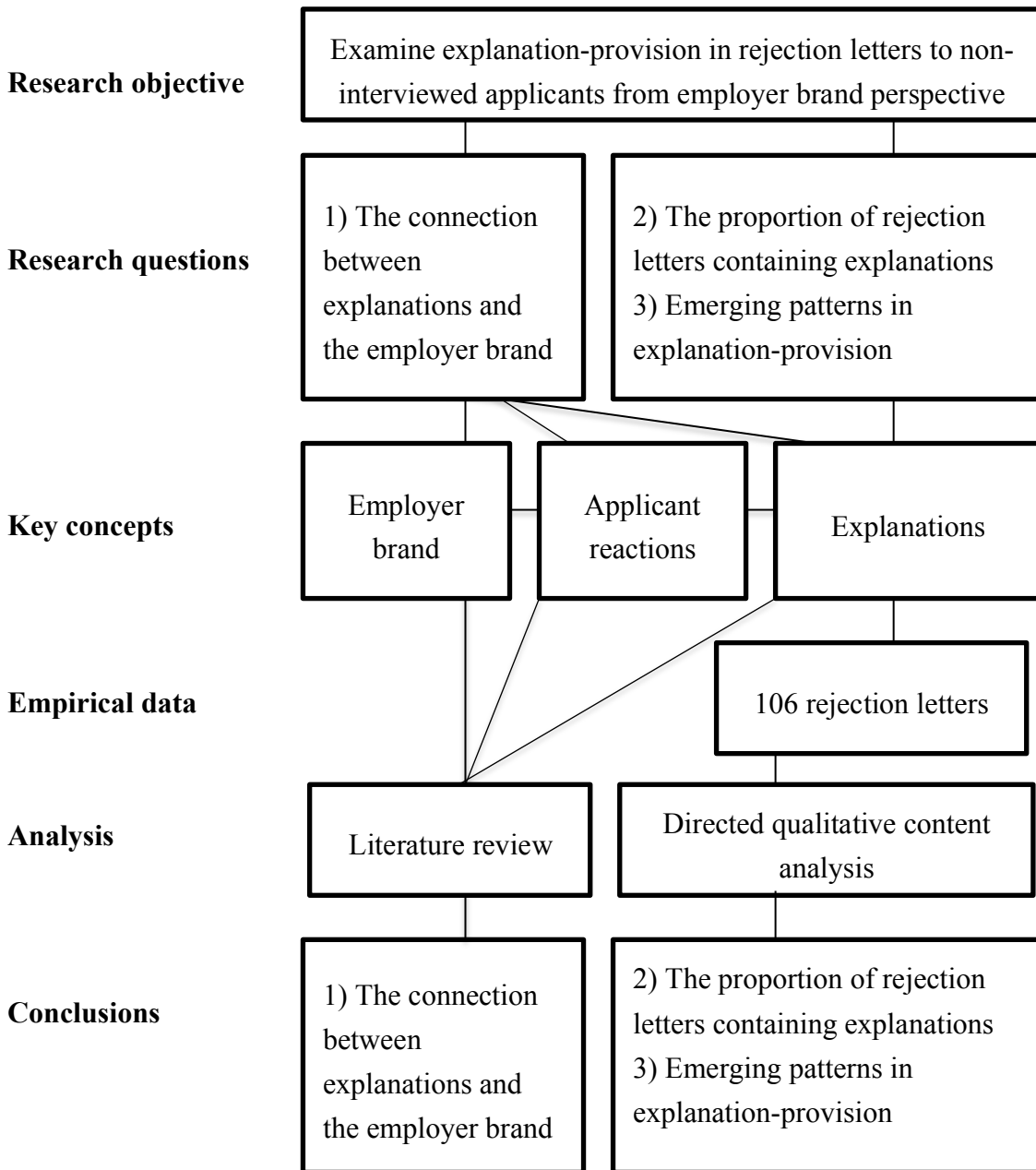


Figure 1 Structural framework of the study

The first research question is theoretical, and it is approached by conducting a brief literature review on relevant theories of employer brand, applicant reactions, and explanations. The second and third questions are empirical; they were adapted from Limaye’s (2001, 109) research suggestions, and they are answered based on empirical

data gathered for this study. The data, consisting of 106 rejection letters, is analysed by using directed qualitative content analysis.

In order to place this study in its relevant theoretical background, chapter 2 presents a quick overview on the significance of employer brand before moving onto the topic of applicant reactions. Since the research covering explanations to job applicants has been dominated by the selection fairness perspective but has not taken on a unified theoretical approach (Truxillo et al. 2009, 357), this study covers the basics of the relevant fairness literature in chapter 2 before taking a closer look at the concepts of applicant rejection and explanations in chapter 3. Chapter 4 describes the nature of the data and the design of the empirical analysis, and lastly, chapters 5 and 6 discuss the findings and conclusions of this study.

2 APPLICANT REACTIONS AND THE EMPLOYER BRAND

2.1 The significance of the employer brand

Staffing is an organisational system that focuses on attracting, retaining, and developing staff and which comprises mainly of two core dimensions: recruitment and selection (O'Meara & Petzall 2013, 5). While recruitment deals with the sourcing of applicants, selection identifies the most qualified people from the applicant pool, and when these two activities complement each other, they have the potential of creating competitive advantage as strategically critical functions (Ployhart & Kim 2014, 5–6). When staffing is integrated with the organisational strategy and has a long-term focus with a mechanism to translate strategic demands into practice, it gains both a greater organisational importance as well as a more sophisticated form with a multi-stakeholder approach (Millmore 2003, 92–94). However, in reality, it appears that recruitment and selection are often treated as separate and marginal tasks instead of as meaningful and integrated tasks (Storey 1992, 35). Millmore (2003) surveyed 180 organisations and found that less than 8% practiced strategic recruitment and selection.

Most often, it is the Human Resources (HR) function that primarily handles the responsibility of staffing (Ployhart & Kim 2014, 5–6), but organisations are increasingly choosing to outsource recruitment and selection activities to external service providers. The rationale for this has generally shifted from cost reductions to more strategic advantages since many organisations are looking to leverage the best practices of industry experts. (Ume-Amen 2010.) Strategic recruitment and selection matches both short- and long-term goals of the organisation by investing in a system that ensures that both the staff and the applicant pool are continuously of high quality and meeting the organisational needs; attracting and retaining the right personnel can be very costly if not done with strategic longevity (O'Meara & Petzall 2013, 31–33). An important cornerstone for this is the employer brand, which has been recognised as a means for competitive advantage and differentiation (Cable & Turban 2001, 125); Ambler and Barrow (1996, 187) defined it as a "package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company". The employer brand comprises of job seekers' collective employer knowledge (Cable & Turban 2001), and it has a strong influence on their application intentions and

perceptions of employer attractiveness (Chapman, Uggerslev, Carroll, Piasentin & Jones 2005, 11). Employer knowledge contains three different facets: employer familiarity, employer reputation, and employer image (Cable & Turban 2001, 123–124).

Recruitment literature has shown the significance of the employer brand when it comes to recruitment outcomes. For example, Turban and Cable (2003) conducted two studies which both indicated that firms with better reputation attract more and higher-quality applicants; the employer brand is viewed as a clue about job attributes, and applicants may even be willing to accept a smaller salary from a company which they perceive favourably. According to Collins and Kanar (2014, 288) "employer brands can impact a range of outcomes from a potential applicant's reaction to recruitment practices, submitting a job application, choosing the organization over its competitors, voluntary turnover decisions, positive or negative word-of-mouth, and spillover effects to the product brand." Applicants' perceptions about the organisation are formed early in the first interactions, and they transform into knowledge that is quite stable in the long run (Cable & Turban 2001).

Employer branding, which "involves internally and externally promoting a clear view of what makes a firm different and desirable as an employer" (Lievens 2007, 51), is related to the recognition of applicants as customers (Thite 2004, 37). Word-of-mouth is viewed as the most credible source of employer brand information (Wilden et al. 2010, 70), and as applicants share their experiences in their professional and social networks (Smither et al. 1993) their justice expectations are shaped by this peer communication (Geenen, Proost, Schreurs, van Dam & von Grumbkow 2013, 43). Glassdoor.com is a website with a free database of "company reviews, CEO approval ratings, salary reports, interview reviews and questions, benefits reviews, office photos and more"; it has 64 million unique monthly visitors and almost 50 million written reviews on organisations by employees and job applicants (Glassdoor.com 2019). However, it is only one amongst countless of outlets for disgruntled job applicants to generate word-of-mouth on organisations. Negative word-of-mouth has direct implications on the organisational image (Wilden et al. 2010, 70), which, in turn, influences the size and quality of the applicant pool (Collins & Han 2004). A large and qualified pool of applicants is vital for organisations in the "war for talent" as it creates prospective competitive advantage (see, for example, Michaels, Handfield-Jones & Axelrod 2001).

Applicants generate perceptions about organisations every time they partake in selection processes (Rynes, Bretz & Gerhart 1991), and if they react positively towards the process, they also form positive attitudes towards the organisation (Bauer et al. 2006, 610). Studies have found a constant positive relationship between perceived procedural fairness and applicant reactions ($r = 0.44$) (Hausknecht et al. 2004, 656), and three kinds of outcome variables have been linked to applicant reactions: attitudes, intentions, and behaviors (McCarthy et al. 2017, 1714). Unpleasant experiences may lead to decreased perceptions about reapplication and a lower willingness to recommend the company (Bauer et al. 2006, 616), and negative experiences during the selection process can also affect applicants' well-being (Schinkel, van Dierendonck, van Vianen & Ryan 2011, 154), which is in conflict with the principles of a socially responsible organisation.

2.2 Applicant reactions to selection procedures

The primary focus of personnel selection research prior to the 1990s was the organisation instead of the applicant; there is a shorter history for studies on applicant reactions (Ababneh, Hackett & Schat 2014, 111), which cover the “attitudes, affect, or cognitions an individual might have about the hiring process” (Ryan & Ployhard 2000, 566) and also “how these perceptions affect applicants' attitudes about the company and their subsequent behavior” (Cropanzano & Ambrose 2015, 621). Ever since Gilliland (1993) developed the first consistent model of applicant reactions based on the organisational justice theory (Greenberg 1987), the field, including the literature covering the effect of explanations on applicant reactions (Truxillo et al. 2009, 348), has been dominated by the *selection fairness* approach (Truxillo, Bauer & McCartney 2015, 621). This approach “focuses on perceptions of applicants' fair treatment during the actual application and selection process, including the period after either being hired or rejected; and how applicants' perceptions affect their perceptions of the process itself, the organization, and themselves, and future behavioral intentions and behaviors such as job offer acceptance or steps toward litigation” (Truxillo et al. 2015, 622).

Gilliland (1993) combined organisational justice theory, which explains how people's perceptions of fairness in organisations are formed (Colquitt, Greenberg & Zapata-Phelan 2005, 5), with existing research on reactions to selection procedures to

build an organisational justice model of applicant reactions. Organisational sciences view justice as a social construct: an act is considered just if the majority of people perceive it as such (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter & Ng 2001, 425). Despite the history of non-established consensus on the number of organisational justice dimensions, three factors – *distributive justice*, *procedural justice*, and *interactional justice*, of which the ultimate consists of two facets called *interpersonal justice* and *informational justice* – have received research support as independent moderators of organisational justice perceptions (Colquitt et al. 2001, 427, 438). While procedural justice deals with the fairness of processes, and distributive justice with the fairness of the outcome, interactional justice focuses on the adequacy of communication (Folger & Cropanzano 1998, xxi).

One of the main theoretical contributions of Gilliland's (1993) model was that applicants are not only interested in a fair outcome but in fair processes as well (Truxillo, Bauer & Garcia 2017, 54). He embedded Leventhal's (1980) 10 procedural justice rules into the context of selection systems, following Greenberg's (1990) grouping of the rules under three broad categories: *interpersonal treatment* (two-way communication, interpersonal effectiveness, and propriety of questions), *formal characteristics* (reconsideration opportunity, opportunity to perform, job relatedness, and consistency), and *explanation* (selection information, feedback, and honesty). The rules have gained wide empirical support for their role in determining applicant reactions (Truxillo et al. 2017, 59). Bauer, Truxillo, Sanchez, Graig, Ferrara, and Campion (2001, 394) found that Gilliland's (1993) procedural justice rules factored into two higher-order factors: *social fairness*, which involves the fair treatment of and communication with applicants, and *structure fairness*, which involves the procedural elements of recruitment and selection. This division has been central to most studies covering explanations to job applicants. Structure fairness focuses on offering applicants information that is specific and rich in substance, and social fairness is related to giving explanations in an interpersonally sensitive manner. (Truxillo et al. 2009, 348.) These dimensions have been studied by focusing on the perceived adequacy of explanations, namely the levels of information sensitivity and information specificity (chapter 3.2.2).

Truxillo, Bauer, McCarthy, Anderson and Ahmed (2016, 13) suggested that the impact of selection fairness for applicant reactions is three-fold: Perceptions of justice affect applicants' reactions and decisions first during the hiring process. They then have

an influence on applicants' attitudes and behaviours after the selection decision, and lastly, fairness perceptions shape applicants' well-being and self-perceptions. Truxillo et al. (2015, 630–633) proposed four ways for employers to facilitate applicants' fairness perceptions: 1) changing existing selection methods to find a better balance between fair and efficient procedures, 2) changing applicant treatment, as fairness has been found to be a meaningful determinant of applicant reactions (Bauer et al. 2001, 394), 3) providing applicants with explanations, since both meta-analytical and empirical evidence show that offering rationale for selection decisions has a significant effect on applicant perceptions of fairness, perceptions of the hiring organisation, test performance, and test-taking motivation (Truxillo et al. 2009), and 4) providing applicants with feedback, which at the very least means notifying applicants about whether or not they were chosen for the job.

Fairness theory is another extension of organisational justice theory (LaHuis, MacLane & Schlessman. 2007, 384). It is a model of accountability that implies that the assignment of blame is essential to social injustice when an ethically questionable act has injured an individual's well-being. In other words, in order for unfairness perceptions to arise, there needs to be a target to hold accountable. (Folger & Cropanzano 2001, 1, 3.) Furthermore, the situation is perceived unfair only if through counterfactual thinking (i.e. "cognitive representations of what might have been"; Colquitt & Greenberg 2003, 169) it is perceived that the accountable party *could* and *should* have acted in a different way which *would* have led to a more fair outcome (Truxillo et al. 2009, 348). Since "people respond to discrepancies between a counterfactual and an actual event, and the magnitude of the discrepancy is related to the emotional and motivational strength of responses to it" (Greenberg 2002, 11), in response to a specific event, those individuals who can easily imagine a more favourable outcome, and who believe that the accountable party could and should have acted differently, would react the most negatively (LaHuis et al. 2007, 384). In the applicant rejection context, the should-counterfactual would cover the extent to which the applicant believes the decision maker had a moral responsibility to act differently, while the could-counterfactual would rely on a judgement of the decision maker's authority to act differently, and the would-counterfactual would base on the applicant's outcome-severity perception (Shaw, Wild & Colquitt 2003, 446–447). The likelihood of the formation of these counterfactuals can be reduced by providing the rejected

applicant with explanations that may influence his or her fairness perceptions (Gilliland 2001; chapter 3.2.1).

Contemporary studies have expanded beyond Gilliland's (1993) model as they have presented new theoretical frameworks that paint the picture behind applicant reactions and explain *why* applicants react the way they do (McCarthy et al. 2017, 1699); although, Truxillo et al. (2017, 59) pointed out that they all lean on the concept of fairness. Three theoretical perspectives, *expectancy theory*, *fairness heuristic theory*, and *attribution theory*, have become the foundation for this area of applicant reactions research, and together they predict that people's justice expectations directly determine their applicant attributions which in turn lead directly to applicant reactions (McCarthy et al. 2017, 1699–1700). Bell, Ryan, and Wiechmann (2004, 6) defined these justice expectations as “an individual's belief that he or she will experience fairness in a future event or social interaction.” The following paragraphs discuss these theories and their relationship to explanation-provision.

Our expectations about the future generally underlie all of our behavioural choices, which is why expectations have been used to study a wide arrange of different phenomena (Bell, Wiechmann & Ryan 2006, 455). Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory explains an individual's motivation to make a choice about acting a certain way based on their ideas on the desirability of expected outcomes: “people will be motivated if they believe that strong effort will lead to good performance and good performance will lead to desired rewards” (De Simone 2015, 19). The key elements of the expectancy model are *expectancy* (the belief that certain effort will lead to a certain performance), *instrumentality* (the belief that certain performance will lead to a certain outcome), and *valence* (the expected desirability of the outcome). In the context of employee selection, expectancy can be seen as the applicant's notion that putting in the effort will result in a well-crafted job application, instrumentality as the belief that a good application will result in job attainment, and valence as the expected desirability of obtaining the job. (Sanchez, Truxillo & Bauer 2000, 740.) Past experiences and personal qualifications both influence the applicant's job attainment expectations (Gilliland 1993, 716). When people have negative expectations about selection fairness, they might be less motivated to put in the effort (Bell et al. 2006, 456) – or, perhaps, to even apply at all. Furthermore, applicants who hold more optimistic expectations about a company react more positively than their less optimistic counterparts when they perceive the

recruitment selection as fair as well as more negatively when they perceive it as unfair (Schinkel, van Vianen & Ryan 2016, 112).

However, expectancy theory fails to acknowledge that people often display a stronger reaction to the perceived fairness of their treatment rather than to the favourability of the outcome. Fairness heuristic theory has its basis on the "fundamental social dilemma": while the partaking in social endeavours allows for possibilities that might be unattainable for an individual acting alone, being part of a social group also makes one vulnerable to rejection and exploitation. (Lind 2001, 61.) People's expectations and reactions are guided by a fairness heuristic, which they use to make sense of organisational actions (McCarthy et al. 2017, 1699). What people judge to be fair has been widely accepted to be explained by the equity theory: "people judge an outcome as fair when their own outcome-to-input ratio equals some comparative or referent outcome-to-input ratio." This usually requires social comparison information but, when it is unavailable, people may use other available fairness information as a substitute. (Van Den Bos 2001, 65–66.)

In the forming of a fairness heuristic, there is a strong primacy effect: fairness judgements develop at the onset of the relationship with a new person or an organisation, and the first pieces of relevant information dominate the feelings of overall fair treatment. This general fairness judgement will not be subjected to much revision later on, unless there is a significant transformation in the relationship between the parties or some exceptionally conflicting fairness information appears. The heuristic will be assumed to be accurate, and any later information relevant to the judgment will be interpreted through this existing lens. Although potent displays of fair or unfair treatment can affect the overall judgement at a later time, the primacy effect suggests that perceived fairness is exceptionally powerful in the very first encounters between a person and an organisation. (Lind 2001, 70–71, 73.) For staffing professionals, this increases the importance of understanding what information is available to the applicants in order to understand what they are reacting to (Van Den Bos 2001, 68). If one of the only pieces of communication from the organisation to some of its unsuccessful job applicants is the rejection letter, it is possible that the contents of the message will have a defining impact on the receivers' perceptions about the whole organisation.

Since a negative selection outcome is often likely to be unpleasant and, perhaps, unexpected to applicants, it is likely to spark attributional processing (Ployhart &

Harold 2004, 86). Attribution theory explains the ways in which people rationalise different phenomena by attributing them to different causes; in essence, how they answer the question "what caused the observed behavior and its consequences?" (Jones, Kanouse, Kelley, Nisbett, Valins, & Weiner 1972, 9). In the context of employee selection, *applicant-attribution-reaction theory* (AART; Ployhart & Harold 2004), which suggests that "applicant reactions are driven by attributions made about how they are treated and the outcomes they receive", has been influential and foundational to many applicant reactions studies (McCarthy et al. 2017, 1700). In contrast to organisational justice theory, AART replaces fairness perceptions with attributions as the primary determinant of applicant reactions and views fairness perceptions as a mediator between applicant attributions and behaviours (Ababneh et al. 2014, 112). In essence, when applicants attribute an event to internal (initiated by the applicant), stable (static over time), and controllable (controllable by the applicant) causes, they perceive it as more fair, and consequently react more positively towards it. On the other hand, the opposite is true when events are linked to external, unstable, and uncontrollable attributions (Ployhart & Harold 2004, 91). For instance, one rejected applicant may react negatively towards the recruiting organisation if they perceive the negative selection outcome as unfair, while another rejected applicant may not react negatively if he or she attributes the outcome to his or her own poor performance. However, self-serving bias means that people often aspire to protect their self-perceptions by attributing success to internal and failure to external causes. Rejected job applicants are more likely to attribute the outcome to external, unstable, and uncontrollable factors than are selected applicants (Ployhard & Harold 2004, 95), but the attribution-process can be influenced by organisational actions: explanation-provision in employment rejection letters increase the likeliness for applicants' internal, stable, and controllable attributions for the refusal, enhancing fairness perceptions (Ababneh et al. 2014, 125) and consecutive reactions towards the employer.

3 EXPLAINING REJECTION

3.1 Applicant rejection – bad news and risk of conflict

”Life in organizations is punctuated by bad news” (Bies 2013, 136), and rejecting unsuccessful job applicants is undoubtedly one of the most frequent and global forms of it; every time there is an excess of labour offering in comparison to open positions, some people are almost inevitably rejected. While it is not uncommon that rejected applicants do not receive any communication regarding their status, when they do, it is usually through a letter but sometimes by phone or face-to-face (Waung & Brice 2000, 2055, 2063). An employment rejection letter, also referred to as applicant rejection letter, candidate rejection letter, or job rejection letter, is a letter which informs an individual that he or she has not been chosen for a position (Brown 1993, 770). Shaw (2000, 32) called it ”a unique form of mass media in contemporary life”, since these letters are both sent and read widely around the world. Oftentimes they are also form letters: standardised messages sent out in bulk to multiple addressees with only slight modifications (Barešová 2008, 13; Deveci & Pasha-Zaidi 2017, 429). Organisations are increasingly adopting high-tech solutions to support staffing activities, and unsuccessful applicants can be quickly notified with form letters via automated computer systems (Bauer, Truxillo, Mack & Costa 2011, 190, 210). On the one hand, technological advances have made recruitment and selection processes more automated and resource-efficient than ever before, but on the other hand, more and more applicants are being rejected without personal contact (Schinkel et al. 2011, 146). This has resulted in job seekers reporting that they do not feel respected in the process (Boswell et al. 2003, 33), and the phenomenon of submitting job applications and hearing very little, or nothing, in return has received the nickname of application black hole – ”where resumes go to die” (see, for example, Birkel 2013, 34; Miller 2016).

The concept of bad news can be defined as ”information that results in a perceived loss by the receiver, and it creates cognitive, emotional, or behavioral deficits in the receiver after receiving the news”. What constitutes as bad news and how bad the bad news is are both determined subjectively, shaped by temporal and contextual factors. (Bies 2013, 137–138.) The pool of rejected applicants is not a homogenous lot: some may be more invested in the selection process than others, some may not meet the

employer's requirements now but could do so in the future, and some may take rejection heavier than others. However, it should be noted that studies have only found a weak link between personality and perceptions of the selection process. (Nikolaou, Bauer & Truxillo 2015, 10.)

“An individual's beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between that focal person and another party” is called a *psychological contract* (Robinson & Rousseau 1994, 246), and it needs no explicit promises in order to form (Rousseau 1990, 390). A job application creates a short-term promissory relationship between the applicant and the employer; after investing time and effort into the application process, the applicant expects the organisation to do the same. Sending out a rejection letter might not shake the applicant's belief that he or she invested more in the process than the employer, yet failing to send one could be perceived as violating an obligation, and it makes people view the organisation as less respectful and less polite (Waung & Brice 2000, 261). However, it may be possible that both the applicant and the organisation see the obligation as reduced in level when the application has not been solicited but instead submitted as, for example, an open application.

Rejection can also be seen as a kind of untoward action, or a failure event, which raises concerns for politeness (Tata 2000, 439) – in essence, consideration for the feelings and desires of the other party (Al-Duleimi, Rashid & Abdullah 2016, 263) – and also for needs of conflict management activities (Bies, Shapiro & Cummings 1988, 382). Job applicants' organisational perceptions and subsequent behavior are affected by the way they are rejected (Waung & Brice 2007, 2051); different factors, such as the presence of a contact person or the length of the waiting period (Waung & Brice 2000), have been studied, yet the act of providing an explanation is one of the most consistently proven strategies to influence applicant reactions (Truxillo et al. 2009, 14). Both European and North American publications have emphasized that it is important to provide applicants with informative explanations (Bauer, McCarthy, Anderson, Truxillo & Salgado 2012, 14). Furthermore, Rembel (2012, 64, 67) surveyed Finnish HR professionals who reported that rejected applicants are increasingly interested in receiving explanations and personal feedback about hiring decisions, and they expect the trend to grow in the future. The more unexpected the event, the more likely it is to elicit a sense-making process in people – in essence, they want to understand *why* it happened (Ployhart & Harold 2004, 87).

The *reaction generalisability hypothesis* – which states that applicant reactions towards popular selection procedures are so similar across different societal contexts, such as countries and cultures, that they are widely generalisable – has been supported by a notable body of research involving dozens of different countries (see, for example, Anderson et al. 2010). A meta-analysis by Hausknecht et al. (2004, 652) showed a near-zero correlation between applicant perceptions and age, gender, and ethnic background. While these results could be birthed by methodological confound, it has been suggested that organisations operating internationally need not be overly concerned about the effects of cultural and country differences on applicant reactions when designing their selection procedures (MacCarthy et al. 2017, 1708). This could make the implementing of global and integrated HR systems easier in some aspects. However, even if one was to assume that providing explanations in rejection letters could improve applicant reactions regardless of the cultural context, speech acts (i.e. actions performed through language, such as refusals) are largely bound by cultural norms and values (Wierzbicka 1985, 146). In addition, contemporary human resources management (HRM) research rejects the concept of purely universal best practices (Martín-Alcázar, Romero-Fernandez & Sánchez-Gardey 2008, 112). Therefore, the act of rejecting a job applicant, and the strategy of providing explanations, would most likely need to be tailored differently in dissimilar cultural settings – such as high-context versus low-context cultures – in order to fit the unique contexts of different organisations.

Despite the widely documented benefits of providing explanations, Limaye (2001, 105) mentioned three possible motives for not offering them in a rejection letter – in essence, organisations' limited resources, risk of appearing impolite, and risk of litigation – but also saw the risk of misattribution of reasons by unsuccessful applicants as too high and costly to ignore. While politeness perceptions are highly influenced by cultural contexts (David, Rubino, Keeton, Miller & Patterson 2010, 5), it could be more resource-efficient to offer informative content in rejection letters to all rejected applicants at once than to invest an undefined amount of time in answering their inquiries on an individual basis. Contemporary technologies make this easy. Furthermore, while the risk of litigation may be perceived more serious in some countries than in others, higher fairness perceptions have been found to lessen the likeliness of legal action by job applicants (Gilliland 1993, 695, 723).

3.2 Explanations for bad news

”An explanation is the act or process of revealing the reason for, or the cause of, some event that is not immediately obvious or entirely known” (Shaw et al. 2003, 245), and it is a frequently used impression management tool in an organisational setting (Bell & Tetlock 1989, 105). Explanations are usually categorised into *excuses* and *justifications* based on their contents (Shaw et al. 2003), and their effect on the receiver’s reactions is mediated by their perceived adequacy: sensitivity in the delivery and specificity in the content. Also, since explanations are not offered and received in a vacuum, contextual factors, such as outcome severity, affect their use and effects (Sparks & Fredline 2007, 245). While chapter 2 discussed applicant reactions theories, the following subchapters focus on how different kinds of explanations have been categorised and how the adequacy of explanations affects how they are perceived.

3.2.1 *Explanation type*

Research on explanations to job applicants talks about both explanations and social accounts – often as synonyms, sometimes as related concepts. Cobb and Wooten (1998, 148) defined social accounts as “the explanations one gives another for the decisions and actions he or she has made” which is why this study treats social accounts and explanations as synonyms. Different categorisations of explanations exist, and while studies have generally focused on two different types of them (i.e. excuses and justifications), they have sometimes added *apologies*, which centre around expressions of remorse (Conlon & Ross 1997, 12). Schönbach (1980, 196) also added *refusals* to signify those cases where the explanation provider, or account giver, gives a statement where he or she denies the failure event, refuses to accept any responsibility for it, or refuses to offer an explanation for it. However, if an explanation is conceptualised as reason-revealing, it appears to be at least partially conflicting with the categories of apology and refusal, since these two, on their own, do not address the rationale behind an event. Tucker and Yeow (2011, 12) made a distinction between explanatory social accounts, meaning excuses and justifications, which are used to frame a decision and exonerating social accounts, apologies and refusals, which are not used to explain but to exonerate the account-giver. However, while apologies and refusals do little to explain the reasons behind an event, they might hold an important role when used together with

explanations, since they relate to the judgement of an explanation's adequacy, (Tata 2002, 494; chapter 3.2.2).

As mentioned earlier, dividing explanations into justifications and excuses has been the most popular categorisation system in previous studies. When an explanation is in the form of justification, "the decision maker accepts full responsibility but denies that the act in question is inappropriate by pointing to the fulfillment of some superordinate goal", while with an excuse "the decision maker admits that the act in question is unfavourable or inappropriate but denies full responsibility by citing some external cause or mitigating circumstance" (Shaw et al. 2003, 445). Figure 2 displays the two main explanation types and their equivalent subtypes based on social accounts and fairness theory.

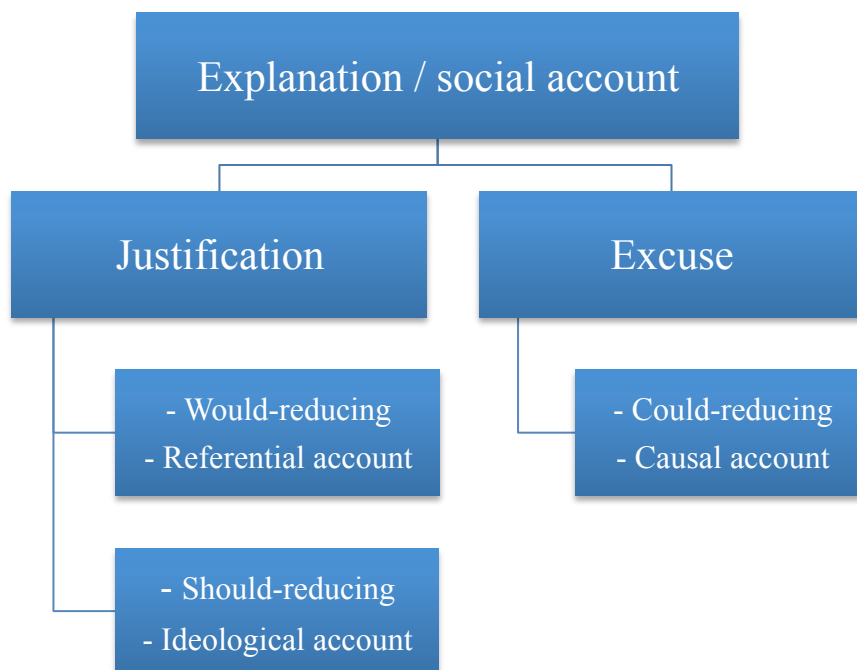


Figure 2 Types of explanations

Explanatory social accounts include *referential accounts*, *ideological accounts*, and *causal accounts* (see, for example, Tucker, Yeow & Viki 2010, 4). Both referential and ideological accounts lean on higher-order justifications in order to legitimise the decision: With a referential account, the account-giver accepts responsibility for the event but attempts to change the frame of reference in order to portray it as less negative. An ideological account focuses on superordinate goals, values, or other important aims to prove that the act was the "right" thing to do. (Horvath et al. 2000,

312.) Bies (1987) labelled excuses as causal accounts and described them as explanations that acknowledge an outcome as negative but attempt to shift responsibility onto external circumstances. Out of the three aforementioned accounts, causal accounts, or simply excuses, have been identified to be the most commonly used in organisational communication (Dunning, Pecotich & O’Cass 2004, 556).

Explanations can also be seen as persuasive arguments to frustrate the counterfactual thinking defined in the fairness theory (chapter 2.2): An ideological account may act as a should-reducing explanation by, for example, validating the decision with details about the selection criteria. A referential account might reduce would-counterfactuals by describing the qualifications of the chosen applicant, in which case a less qualified applicant would be less likely to question the decision. A causal accounts can be seen as a counteract for could-counterfactuals: perceived responsibility may be decreased if the rejection letter explains how the decision was not fully controllable, for instance, by referring to a hiring freeze or a large number of applicants. Since all three counterfactuals (would, should, and could) must be activated in order for an individual to perceive injustice, an effective explanation could focus on reducing the activation of just one of them. (Gilliland, Groth, Baker IV, Dew, Polly & Langdon 2001, 672–675, 685; Shaw et al. 2003, 446–447.)

Despite evidence suggesting that the content of an explanation affects its influence, very little is known about how specific contents affect perceptions and subsequent behaviour (Horvath et al. 2000, 312). While one meta-analysis showed excuses to be more effective than justifications when explaining unfavourable outcomes (Shaw et al. 2003), another meta-analysis found no significant difference between the two different types of explanations (Truxillo et al. 2009). This inconclusiveness could at least partially be explained by the fact that the categorisation of different explanations may not always be straightforward, since they can combine elements of different intentions; in many cases, the coding of an explanation might require a combination of categories (Schönbach 1980, 196). Furthermore, research has not clearly separated explanations for decisions and explanations for procedures (Horvath et al. 2000, 312–312).

Explanations are also combined with some frequency (Sitkin & Bies 1993, 361), and it appears that multiple different explanations elicit more positive responses than singular ones: Gilliland et al. (2001, 699) found that a combination of two different kinds of explanations led to greater fairness perceptions than one explanation in an employment rejection letter, but adding a third explanation resulted in a similar outcome

as two explanations. Sitkin and Bies (1993, 361) suggested that people may prefer multiple explanations since they see them as more accurate and complete representations of the realities behind complex organisational decisions, and also because combined explanations allow for different individuals to choose the information that satisfies their interests. However, although multiple explanations seem to be more favourable than single explanations, there is insufficient evidence to draw conclusions on which explanations, or combinations of them, will trigger the most positive reactions in job applicants (Gilliland et al. 2001, 700).

3.2.2 *Explanation adequacy*

There seems to be a consensus that explanations do not directly influence fairness perceptions but through mediators (Bobocel & Zdaniuk 2005, 479): For an explanation to enhance justice perceptions, it needs to be presented in a sensitive (or sincere) way and be of adequate substance to the applicant. *Information specificity* deals with how relevant and personally addressed the content of the information is, whereas *information sensitivity* deals with how respectful and friendly the style of the message is (Shapiro, Buttner & Barry 1994, 347). In addition to being related to the concepts of social fairness and structure fairness (Truxillo et al. 2009, 348), there is also evidence that the dimensions of explanation adequacy have significant overlap with the facets of interactional justice (chapter 2.2): information specificity could be linked to informational justice and informational sensitivity to interpersonal justice (Walker, Helmuth, Feild & Bauer 2014, 1003–1004). An adequate excuse will make the applicant view the rejection decision as unavoidable, while an adequate justification will paint the decision as appropriate and ethically defensible. On the other hand, an inadequate explanation might be perceived as more unfair than the failure to provide an explanation in the first place (Shaw et al. 2003, 446, 451).

While the importance of explanation adequacy has been acknowledged, there are only a few studies on rejection letter features or contents that increase or decrease adequacy perceptions (Ryan & Huth 2008, 126), which is why the components of explanation adequacy are most likely not limited to the following. Information sensitivity deals with how polite and respectful the style of the message is, and it has been measured by analysing if 1) the recipient is addressed personally in the salutation, 2) the message is signed by a contact person, and 3) there are expressions of politeness,

such as regret, gratitude, or an offer of remedy or further assistance (Shapiro et al. 1994, 361; Ployhart, Ryan & Bennet 1999). Information specificity, on the other hand, has to do with answering the questions *why* and *why me* (Timmerman & Harrison 2005, 381). It has included providing 1) detailed selection information concerning the specific selection process, as opposed to generic, vague content, and also 2) personally addressed selection information about the reasons of the decision, (Shapiro et al. 1994, 356; Ployhart et al. 1999) – in essence, informative feedback. Figure 3 shows an outline of these explanation adequacy facets.

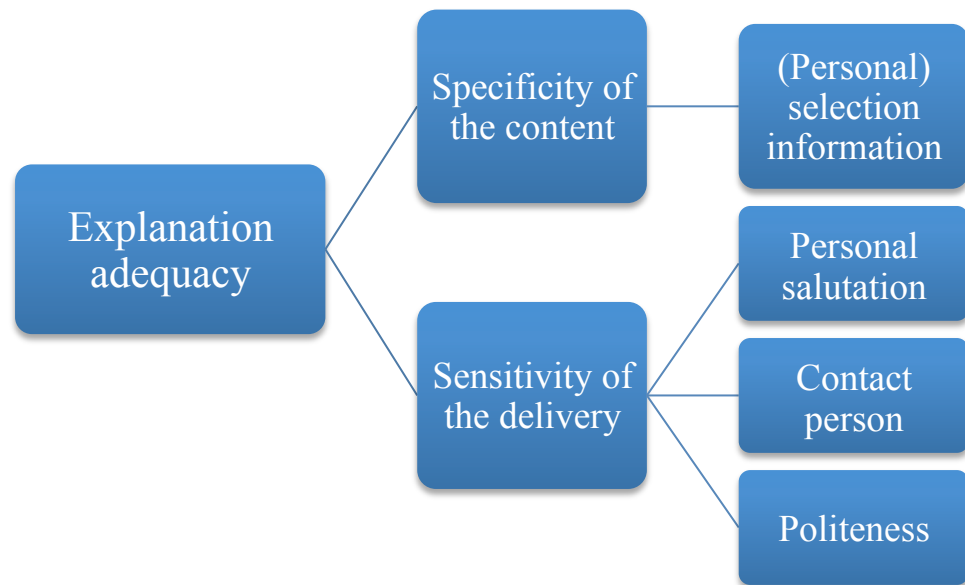


Figure 3 Explanation adequacy

Organisations need to weigh the specificity of information they give about the selection, since while applicants may appreciate the transparency, more detailed descriptions also elicit more evaluation and possibly scepticism (Langer, König & Fitili 2017, 27–29). Leventhal (1980, 23–32) argued that a fair procedure should be consistent, unbiased, accurate, correctable, representative of the interests of all concerned parties, and compatible with ethical and moral standards. When referring to selection criteria, information concerning the hired applicant has been found to enhance selection fairness perceptions (Gilliland et al. 2001, 698), although Aamodt and Peggans (1988, 60) proposed that providing it might only be advisable in a situation including an outstanding candidate, since otherwise the decision might be more easily contested.

Job seekers want to be treated as individuals instead of as parts of the applicant pool; personalised treatment during recruitment and selection makes applicants feel wanted, and it has an influence on their job choice decisions (Boswell et al. 2003, 32–33), which is why companies need to carefully manage a balance between technology and personal relationships. Sending a personalised rejection letter is a way of treating an applicant as an individual and making their experience more personal. A personalised address (i.e. opening the letter with the recipient's name in the salutation) has been found to increase the perceived sensitivity of a rejection letter, while offering personalised, informative feedback has been found to influence the perceived specificity (Ployhart et al. 1999).

Job applicants expect to be provided with information about their performance (Deros, Born & Witte 2004, 116), and simply presenting them with a rejection letter is the simplest form of it. Feedback, usually praise or criticism, can have an informational function, where its focus is primarily on informing and secondarily on motivating, and/or a motivational function, in which case the focus is on encouraging or discouraging but not necessarily on informing (Anderson 2009, 100). Instead of eliciting purely positive reactions, the impact of feedback on the recipient is highly variable (Kluger and DeNisi 1996, 275), which is why Ilgen and Davis (2000, 562) emphasized the importance of caution when offering it. While informative criticism about the unsuccessful applicant may increase his or her fairness perceptions, as long as it is seen as being accurate (Anseel & Lievens 2009, 370), by acting as a specific explanation, it could have an unfavourable effect on the applicant's self-perceptions (Schinkel et al. 2011, 154). Offering generic compliments on the whole applicant pool could be a way of protecting the rejected applicants' self-image while improving his or her reactions to the selection process (Truxillo et al. 2015, 633). Developmental feedback which communicates opportunities to remedy deficiencies, for example through indicating some skills or work experience that the employer appreciates, might encourage some applicants with greater potential to self-improve while discouraging "lower-quality" applicants from reapplying. Naturally, this would only make sense if the information offered were true. (Lahuis et al. 2007, 391–392.)

While it may increase the perceived sensitivity of a rejection letter if it is signed by a contact person instead of, for example, the HR department, Waung and Brice (2000, 256, 262) found evidence that a mention of a contact person might create higher expectations for respectful treatment, and they suggested that sometimes employers might want to think twice before naming one.

Communicating politeness with so-called "friendly statements", such as a thank you, a well-wish, or a promise of further assistance, increased fairness judgements, organisational perceptions, and re-applying intentions and decreased negative emotions in a study by Aamodt and Peggans (1988, 60). Communicating regret with apologies, sometimes referred to as concessions, has been shown to increase the effectiveness of explanations, while, on the other hand, refusals have appeared to have the opposite effect (Tata 2002, 494).

Locker (1999, 26) argued that a successful negative message should be as little surprising as possible. When the explanation is stated first, the reader may be more prepared for the rejection and more likely to accept it as valid (Lehman, Himstreet & Baty 1996, 285). While it has not been included in the few studies measuring explanation adequacy, the rejection sequence in a rejection letter has also been found to influence politeness perceptions (Jansen & Janssen 2011, 59). Presenting the explanation as a buffer before the rejection makes the reader perceive the message as clearer and more agreeable and the sender as more competent and empathic (Jansen & Janssen 2011, 36). However, some studies have found support for the use of direct over indirect order in a rejection letter: the direct order was viewed more positively in a study by Smith, Nolan, and Dai (1996, 71) who suggested that people might not like having to search for the important news in a letter, and Salerno (1988, 49) stated that a reader expecting bad news may perceive buffer sentences as "beating around the bush".

Although both sensitivity and specificity affect how the explanation is perceived, the latter may be of greater significance to the overall adequacy judgement (Shapiro et al. 1994, 365). Furthermore, using information sensitivity alone, without substantive content, in a message conveying a negative outcome may cause the receiver to perceive more unfairness than in the case of no message at all; "sugar-coating" an unfavourable outcome while failing to offer informational substance, such as apologising without explaining, could be seen as manipulative and disrespectful (Skarlicki, Folger & Gee 2004, 336–337.) Shapiro et al. (1994, 364, 366) also found evidence that the perceived severity of an outcome affects the manner in which adequacy judgements are made; the higher the perceived severity, the harder it may be to provide an adequate explanation. Another risk potentially affecting the perceived adequacy of explanations is the risk of "careless overuse" (Sitkin & Bies 1993, 365): when certain explanations are provided frequently, there is a possibility they will become a part of applicants' baseline-expectations. This could mean that while the failure to provide explanations would be

viewed more negatively than before, it might also be increasingly difficult to construct explanations which elicit positive emotions, as their existence in a rejection letter would no longer be surprising.

Since adequately provided explanations can help applicants accept negative selection-decisions better by enhancing their justice perceptions, and since these perceptions could affect the employer brand, recruitment and selection professionals should be trained in applicant-rejection. Inadequate explanation-provision might stem from professionals not being aware of effective strategies (Tata 2002, 499). Most of the time decision-makers do not intentionally choose to be unfair; rather, unfairness happens unintentionally when fairness is not chosen – perhaps out of ignorance. In other words, organisational unfairness is often benign instead of intentional. (Ambrose & Schminke 2009, 253.) Lavelle, Folger and Manegold (2016, 52–54) found that the fairness, or unfairness, of recruitment and selection procedures can affect the extent to which the messenger of the rejection decisions conveys fairness in his or her communication. Unfair procedures caused messengers to minimise contact with rejected applicants and to simply notify them on the decision instead of providing them with explanations.

4 RESEARCH DESIGN OF THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

4.1 Research approach and method

This chapter describes the design of the empirical study that was used to answer the second and third research questions. The purpose was to analyse explanation-provision in employment rejection letters, and when the goal is to achieve straight descriptions of phenomena, *qualitative descriptive design* is often used. So-called basic qualitative description involves low-inference interpretation, which stays close to the surface features of the data, as opposed to studies diving deeper into more abstract interpretations, such as those using grounded theory or narrative descriptions. Furthermore, qualitative descriptive studies commonly apply *qualitative content analysis* as their research method (Sandelowski 2000, 335, 336, 338, 339).

Content analysis is directed at systematically analysing different kinds of communicative material in order to describe a phenomenon, and while qualitative content analysis is focused on latent meanings in addition to formal characteristics, it also makes use of quantitative procedures (Mayring 2004, 266–267). Mayring (2014, 10) referred to qualitative content analysis as a mixed method approach: "assignment of categories to text as qualitative step, working through many text passages and analysis of frequencies of categories as quantitative step." The purpose of qualitative content analysis is to describe patterns or regularities found in the data, yet, contrary to quantitative content analysis, not only manifest content is addressed but also themes, core ideas, and formal aspects (Drisko & Maschi 2015, 85). Furthermore, qualitative content analysis recognises data in its contexts as opposed to detached from it (Mayring 2004, 267); phenomena are generally approached from a naturalistic perspective, and data is observed in its natural state. When it comes to qualitative approaches, qualitative content analysis is the least interpretive as the data are generally re-presented in their own terms, and the expected outcome is a "straight descriptive summary of the informational contents of data organised in a way that best fits the data." (Sandelowski 2000, 337–339.) However, this study does discuss some possible interpretations for the results of the analysis in chapter 6.

4.2 Data collection

The data of this study consisted of 106 employment rejection letters, which were collected by using opportunity sampling – a non-probability sampling method where sampling units are selected based on their availability (Bloor & Wood 2006, 154). The data were authentic, which means that they were "gathered from the genuine communications of people going about their normal business" (Sinclair 1996). Current and recently graduated master's students were chosen as the target population for three reasons: First of all, much of the research on applicant rejection has been conducted on university students (Truxillo et al. 2009, 358), who also represent a significant proportion of job seekers on the entry-level employment market. Second, this study focused on rejection letters to applicants who responded to a job advertisement, and entry-level positions are more likely to be advertised than higher-level positions (Hansen 1999). Third, the recruitment and selection practices in relation to more senior-level job openings can be considerably different, such as when using headhunting methods, which is why the design of this study might be more suited for entry-level contexts.

20 sampling units (i.e. rejection letters) were provided by the thesis author herself. The remaining 86 letters were gathered by contacting relevant Finnish individuals, from the social circle of the author, via social media and presenting them with the opportunity to participate. Out of 13 people contacted, 11 agreed to submit data for analysis. In total, the author included, the participants were five men and seven women between the ages 26 and 29. They were asked to forward rejection letters one-by-one to a provided e-mail address while mentioning in the subject line whether there had or had not been a real-time job-interview before the rejection. It was assumed that since job-interviews are, supposedly, a meaningful experience, the participants would likely have no problem recalling whether or not they had been interviewed in relation to a specific letter. No compensation was offered to any of the participants, but they were assured that both their personal information and all individualising information about the employer organisations would be omitted from the final report. It should also be noted that the Finnish law allows private letters to be voluntarily passed on to a third party as long as the message contains no classified or otherwise explicitly confidential information (Finlex 2014). The criteria for the participants and the data are presented in table 1.

Table 1 Criteria for the participants and the data

<p>Criteria for the participants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current or recently graduated master's student • Finnish national
<p>Criteria for the data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-mail form • Sent by a multinational organisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ No letters from recruitment agencies unless the position in question is with them • Received between the years 2014 and 2019 • Received as a non-interviewed applicant <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ No real-time job-interview before rejection • Written in Finnish or English • In response to a solicited application • Contains an explicit rejection <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ No maybe-letters

All of the letters were in e-mail form, and they were originally received as responses to authentic job applications between the years 2014 and 2019, which meant that the participants' status ranged from a bachelor's student to a master's student to recently graduated at the time of first receiving the letters. 84 of the letters were written in Finnish and 22 in English. Duplicate letters (i.e. letters which identically used the same template form), letters from non-multinational organisations, and letters from recruitment companies in regards to a position in a client company were ruled out of the sample. Also, letters which stated that the recruitment process was only partially finished and indicated that the recipient might still be considered a candidate (so called maybe-letters) were eliminated from the sample, as were letters which indicated that the applicant had not responded to a job posting but rather submitted an open application. All in all, only explicit rejection letters from MNEs to non-interviewed external applicants in relation to solicited applications qualified for the sample, and they represented a total of 84 different organisations. The following table presents an overview on the data as well as the sectors of the represented MNEs with their respective proportions of the letters.

Table 2 Features of the data

Data feature		MNE sectors represented	
106 = all letters	f/106	84 = number of MNEs	f/84
Language <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finnish • English 	79.2%	Secondary/industrial sector <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manufacturing • Utilities • Construction 	33.3%
	20.8%	Tertiary/service sector <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retail • Transportation 	19.1%
		Quaternary/knowledge sector <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media & culture • Finance & insurance & law • Real estate • Information technology • Business support & consultancy • Education 	47.6%

The data represented organisations from a wide range of sectors. Many spanned multiple sectors, yet their placement in table 2 was determined by their primary operations – as indicated online on their websites. The division exhibited in the table follows the three-sector model of economic activity (see, for example, Breathnach 2007, 146; Leseure 2010, 27–28.). The primary sector, which represents the production of raw materials, was omitted from the table since none of the letters were from organisations in this sector – unsurprisingly, since the size of the primary sector in the developed world has decreased significantly. The secondary sector represents the producing of finished products from raw materials, and a total of 33.3% of all letters represented this sector. The tertiary sector has been defined in different ways by different researchers, and no unanimously accepted definition exists (Joshi 2006, 321). In this study, it was defined as being concerned with uniting goods or services with customers by offering relevant retail, wholesale, and transportation services, also referred to as physical services. 19.1% of the letters were from organisations operating in this sector. Most of the sampling units, 47.6%, represented the quaternary sector, which includes intellectual, highly knowledge-intensive services.

Although Jablin and Krone (1984, 396) found that the contents of employment rejection letters may show variance relating to the organisational sector, in this study

sectoral differences were not examined in the data. The sectoral division in table 2 was presented solely for the purpose of showcasing the background of the data – not to draw any conclusions about rejection letters in particular sectors.

4.3 Data analysis

A directed approach (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, 1281), also referred to as a structured approach (Mayring 2014, 95), was used to conduct the qualitative content analysis of this study. This approach has also been called the template analysis style (Miller & Crabtree 1992, 18), and the following model (figure 4) describes the procedural sequence of this type of analytical approach.

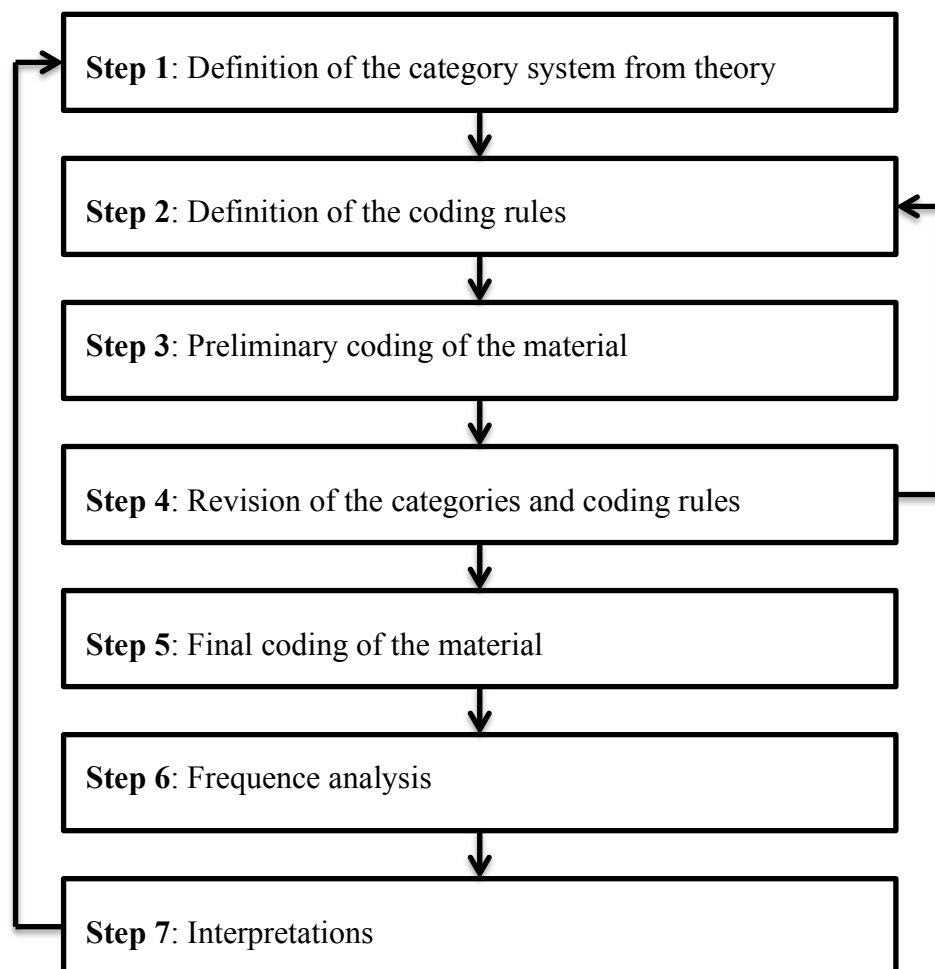


Figure 4 Procedural sequence of directed qualitative content analysis (adapted from Mayring 2014, 96)

The nominal categories, and their subsequent coding rules, which were used in the analysis, were first deductively formulated, based on related literature, and then cautiously modified in the course of analysis as the data were reviewed for content and coded according to the categories (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, 1281–1283). The categories combined elements from different theories (all discussed in chapters 2 and 3) since the literature on explanation-provision to job applicants has not been theoretically unified (Truxillo et al. 2009, 357). However, since categorising explanations into different social accounts and counterfactual-reducing explanations turned out to be excessively interpretational – due to conflicting or overlapping categorisations in previous research – the risk of consequences for trustworthiness was perceived to be too high, and explanations were eventually only categorised as either excuses or justifications. This allowed the author to stay closer to the data, although coding of linguistic material is always subjective. For similar reasons, no analysis was done on the provision of multiple explanations.

Data gathering and analysing were conducted concurrently in this descriptive study, as is the norm in qualitative researches (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas 2013, 401). The contents of the sampling units were coded into categories as they were available to the thesis author, and as the sample grew in size and turned richer, the categories and their coding rules were revisited repeatedly. Each letter was coded independently.

Frequency analysis is the most common way to quantify content analysis data (Mayring 2014, 22), although in qualitative content analysis counting "is a means to an end, not an end itself" since the result is "a description of the patterns or regularities in the data that have, in part, been discovered and then confirmed by counting" (Sandelowski 2000, 338). The category and subcategory frequencies were counted first as cardinal numbers the per cent proportions of which were determined and rounded to the closest single decimal.

The following chapter, which presents the findings of the empirical analysis, further describes the coding rules of the categories. To increase trustworthiness, some authentic quotations were provided, but as most of the data were in Finnish, many of the extracts were translated from Finnish to English. However, pieces of text containing highly specific information, that would risk the anonymity of a participants or an organisation, were not provided, which is why some categories lack authentic examples. Furthermore, the following chapter also compares the findings of this study to some of the previous studies that have analysed similar contents in employment rejection letters.

5 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

5.1 Prevalence of explanation-provision in employment rejection letters

Qualitative content analysis of 106 employment rejection letters discovered that 73 sampling units contained at least one statement that revealed some type of reason for or cause of the negative selection decision. Otherwise stated, a total of 68.9% of the letters offered some form of an explanation for the rejection. The remaining 33 letters, representing 31.1% of the sample, contained no statements that were interpreted as reason-revealing concerning the rejection. The pie chart of figure 5 displays the proportions of data containing or lacking one or more explanations for rejection, and the following subchapters (i.e. 5.2 and 5.3) further discuss the qualities of these explanations and also the adequacy dimensions that were examined in relation to them.

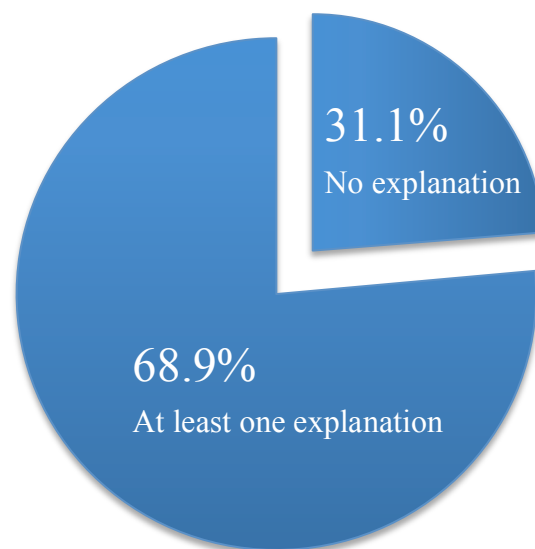


Figure 5 The proportions of data containing or lacking explanations

When compared with previous research, the proportions found are not far from those in other studies on rejection letters in low-context cultures: Barešová's (2008, 110) study found an explanation in 61% of her sample of American rejection letters (while the number was 19% in Japanese letters), and Devici and Pasha-Zaidi's (2017, 435) analysis revealed an explanation was present in 62% of the sample. On the other hand,

some other studies have arrived at the opposite conclusion about the prevalence of explanations in rejection letters. For example, Keckman (2017, 71) analysed a hundred Finnish rejection letters and reported that only 15% offered an explanation. However, it is possible that the stark difference between Keckman's findings and those of this study might be due to different conceptualisations of explanations rather than significant variances in data: Keckman (2017, 47) reported that statements describing the number of applicants or applications were found in a significant proportion of her sample, and since these kinds of statements were categorised as explanations in this study (chapter 5.2), it brings her findings closer to the ones reported here.

5.2 Explanation types in employment rejection letters

In the categorisation of explanation types, statements which offered a reason for or a cause of the rejection were subcategorised as either justifications or excuses based on the following rule: justifications were statements which referred to the appropriateness of the decision in order to legitimise it, and excuses were statements which showed that the decision was affected by some external cause or mitigating circumstance (Truxillo et al. 2009, 348). A justification was found to be included in 24 sampling units, while a total of 62 letters contained an excuse. Table 3 displays the coding and frequencies of different types of excuses and justifications. The plus signs in the table signal that these explanations were always offered in conjunction with the bullet-point explanation under which they are listed, while the hollow bullet-points indicate that the explanation was listed as subtype for another explanation. Different frequencies are listed for both the full sample and for the letters containing explanations.

By far, the most extensively used explanation (present in 57.5% of all letters) was one that referred to a "large number", or even a "record number", of applications/applicants, or alternatively to how the job posting had attracted a lot of interest. In conjunction with the reference to the number of applicants or applications, 37 letters favourably described the quality of the applicants or applications (e.g. "We have received many interesting and good applications"), 18 letters made a reference to the actual number of applicants (e.g. "over 6000 applications"), 11 letters mentioned that the selection decision or process had been challenging (e.g. "Hyviä hakemuksia tuli erittäin paljon ja päätös jatkoon menevien osalta oli erityisen haastavaa." [We received a great number of good applications, and the decision on which ones should move on to

the next phase was very challenging.]), and two letters referred to a lack of resources (e.g. “Valitettavasti resurssimme eivät millään riittänyt kaikkien hakijoiden haastattelemiseen.” [Unfortunately, our resources were insufficient for interviewing all the applicants.]) The only kind of excuse that was not offered together with a reference to a large applicant pool explained a hiring freeze: in one of the letters the organisation had decided to end the selection process due to the position in question having been terminated.

Table 3 Frequencies of explanation types

EXPLANATION TYPE	FREQUENCY			
	X = explanation type freq. 106 = all letters 73 = letters with explanations			
	f	f/X	f/73	f/106
Excuse	62	-	84.9%	58.5%
• Large number of applicants/applications	61	98.4%	83.6%	57.5%
+ Good quality of applicants/applications	37	59.7%	50.7%	34.9%
+ Actual number of applicants/applications	18	29%	24.7%	17%
+ Challenging choice/process	11	17.7%	15.1%	10.4%
+ Lack of resources	2	3.2%	2.7%	2%
• Hiring freeze	1	1.6%	1.4%	0.9%
Justification	24	-	32.9%	22.6%
• ”The most qualified was selected”	12	50%	16.4%	11.3%
• Selection criteria	10	41.7%	13.7%	9.4%
○ Qualifications of the chosen applicant	4	16.7%	5.5%	3.8%
• Informative feedback	2	8.3%	2.7%	1.9%
• <i>Speculative justification</i>	1	4.2%	1.4%	0.9%

The percentage of the rejection letters containing an explanation referring to the size of the applicant pool was around 65% in a study by Shaw (2000, 36) and around 60% in a study by Devici and Pasha-Zaidi (2017, 435) – although the letters in these studies had been sent from academic institutions to Ph.D. job seekers. Statements referring to the number of applicants have also been found to be common in other studies on rejection letters (cf. Eckberg 1984, 343; Furlong & Furlong 1994, 94–95) and, as was mentioned

earlier, a significant proportion of Keckman's (2017, 47) data contained this kind of statement.

In this study, the most common type of justification (present in 22.6% of all letters) was a statement legitimising the negative selection decision by simply declaring that the most qualified applicant, or applicants, had been selected (e.g. "We have chosen to continue the recruitment process with candidates whose qualifications better match our requirements.") Only 10 letters gave a description on the criteria the selection decision was based on, out of which 4 letters referred to the qualifications of the chosen applicant. However, these explanations were often quite thorough, even offering a detailed list of information. This created a stark contrast between letters that included as opposed to letters that did not include selection criteria in their message.

Informative feedback concerning the rejected applicant, as opposed to generic comments about the applicant pool, was used as a justification for the negative selection decision in two letters (1.9%). Only statements that answered the question *why me* were included, which is why the feedback in these statements could be seen as criticism (e.g. "we don't believe that there's a fit, based on the answers you gave us on our earlier questionnaire"). In addition, one letter offered an explanation that was coded as a speculative justification, since it gave a list of possible explanations preceded with a statement about how the rejection might or might not have happened due to these reasons. This explanation was coupled with a statement discouraging the applicant from contacting the organisation for more specific selection information.

Keckman (2017, 71–72) reported that in her sample 15% of the letters mentioned selection criteria; however, based on her categorisation, she seemed to have included not only selection criteria but also direct negative feedback and references to a lack of resources or a hiring freeze. When a similar conceptualisation of selection criteria is followed, the equivalent percentage in this study is 16%. Keckman also reported that 10% of her letters stated that the most qualified applicant had been chosen, which is in line with the results of this study (11.3%).

5.3 Explanation adequacy in employment rejection letters

While the perceived adequacy of an explanation is highly subjective, adequacy dimensions were categorised according to the studies discussed in chapter 3.2.2: sensitivity deals with the style in which the message is delivered, and specificity has to

do with the substance of the explanation itself. Table 4 shows the frequencies of different categories and their codes, with inductively added codes in italics. The plus signs used in the table indicate that these adequacy items were always offered in conjunction with the bullet-point item under which they are listed, while the hollow bullet-points indicate that the feature is listed as a subtype for another item. Different frequencies are listed for both the full sample and for the letters containing explanations.

Table 4 Frequencies of adequacy dimensions

ADEQUACY DIMENSION	FREQUENCY			
	106 = all letters 73 = letters with explanations $f_2 = f$ in letters with explanations			
	f	f/106	f₂	f₂/73
Sensitivity	106	100%	73	100%
• Personal salutation	39	36.8%	22	30.1%
○ With first name	30	28.3%	18	24.7%
○ With full name	9	8.5%	4	5.5%
• Contact person	59	55.7%	43	58.9%
○ In signature	50	47.2%	38	52.1%
+ <i>In contact information</i>	25	23.6%	20	27.4%
○ <i>In sender address</i>	23	21.7%	22	30.1%
• Politeness	106	100%	73	100%
○ Thank you	105	99.1%	73	100%
○ Apology	88	83%	58	79.5%
○ Well-wish	73	68.9%	53	72.6%
○ Reference to future employment	68	64.2%	48	65.8%
○ Offer of further assistance	7	6.6%	6	8.2%
○ Explanation before rejection	51	48.1%	51	69.9%
Specificity	12	11.3%	12	16.4%
• Selection criteria	10	9.4%	10	13.7%
• Informative feedback	2	1.9%	2	2.7%
Sensitivity + Specificity	12	11.3%	12	16.4%

When it comes to explanation adequacy, every single letter in the sample communicated sensitivity in at least one of the three subcategories (i.e. personal

salutation, contact person, and politeness), while statements related to explanation specificity were considerably less prevalent. A personal salutation was judged to be present in letters which mentioned the recipient's name in the opening; for example, "Hello, [name]" was a personal salutation whereas "Dear applicant" was not. 36.8% of the letters opened with a personal salutation – in 24.7% of the cases the first name and in 5.5% the full name of the applicant. However, in three letters the applicant's name was spelled incorrectly, which could have an impact on perceived sensitivity.

Signature by a contact person (i.e. a named representative of the organisation) was present in 50 letters. The remainder of the sampling units were generally either signed by the name of the organisation or the HR department. One letter lacked signature of any kind, and one included a placeholder, "\${Sender}\$", in place of the signature. However, the presence or absence of a contact person was not limited to the signature; two other codes, contact information and sender account, were added inductively to reflect the different ways a contact person was present or absent in the data. The contact person's contact information was offered almost in 23.6% of the letters, and more than one in five letters were sent from the contact person's personal e-mail address.

Politeness was analysed by coding statements related to gratitude (thank you), concern or regret (apology), well-wishes, future employment in the organisation, and offers of further assistance. In addition to these, the rejection sequence was also analysed. Some letters contained more than one statement of one type of politeness, but no sampling unit-based frequencies were counted for this category. In other words, certain politeness statements were either present or not present in each letter. Almost every single letter, 99.1% of the sample, offered a thank you either for the interest or consideration in general, for the application, or for the time and effort invested (e.g. "Thank you for your application."). Also, a clear majority, 83%, offered some form of an apology. However, they were largely perfunctory: in most cases a simple "unfortunately" before the statement of rejection without any further indications of regret. Three politeness-related contents were more future-oriented: 68.9% gave a well-wish separate from the closing (e.g. "We wish you good luck for the future."), and 64.2% of the letters made a positive reference to future employment in the organisation by either encouraging the applicant to reapply or by stating that his or her previous application would be kept on file (e.g. "we welcome you to apply for any other vacancies available"). Only 7 letters, a mere 6.6% of the sample, stated that the applicant would be welcome to contact the organisation for more information regarding

the selection process and/or individual feedback (e.g. “Mikäli haluat tarkempaa palautetta hakuprosessista tai hakudokumenteistasi, älä epäröi ottaa yhteyttä minuun . . .” [If you want more detailed information regarding the selection process or your application, do not hesitate to contact me . . .]). A large majority of the letters containing an explanation, 69.9%, followed the generally suggested structural order of providing an indirect rejection by offering an explanation before the statement of rejection.

Previous studies have reported similar findings in relation to politeness: For example, statements of gratitude, regret, and well-wishes were also the most common politeness moves in Eckberg’s (1984, 346) analysis of 161 rejection letters, although their relative frequencies were a little lower. Over 90% of all letters offered a thank you in the samples of Aamodt and Peggans (1988, 59) and Deveci and Pasha-Zaidi (2017, 433, 435). Well-wishes were observed in 68.9% of the letters in the sample of this study, which is notably close to the percentages, ranging from 62.71% to 67%, reported in some previous studies (i.e. Aamodt & Peggans 1988, 59; Deveci & Pasha-Zaidi’s 2017, 435; Keckman 2017, 63).

Explanation specificity was judged to be high in letters that offered explanations containing non-generic information specific to the selection process in question. Two types of justifications, in essence, selection criteria and informative feedback (table 3), were seen as being high in explanation specificity, since they were seen as answering the questions *why* or *why me*. However, while all letters containing an explanation which detailed selection criteria were counted as high in specificity (i.e. 10 letters), only two letters offered direct feedback that was clearly informational, detailing personal qualities of the applicant. In addition, one letter contained indirect feedback which specified some qualities, skills, and work experience that the employer appreciates in general, and while it could have an effect on how the letter is perceived, the content of that feedback did not indicate specificity in relation to the negative selection decision in question. Since all letters contained aspects of sensitivity in their style, 12 letters were seen as communicating both sensitivity in their style and specificity in their contents. This represented around one in ten letters in the total sample.

A lack of specificity and personalisation in rejection letters was picked up by Keckman (2017, 86) as well, and she pointed out a conflict between conducting the salutation on a first name basis, as if to communicate intimacy, and failing to deliver a personal message in the body text. Similarly, Barešová (2008, 81, 109, 111) found that while the American rejection letters in her sample made attempts to seem personal, the

contents often lacked specific, informational substance. However, since Jablin and Krone (1984, 403) found a higher frequency of more specific explanations in their sample of rejection letters to interviewed applicants, the findings of this study could be at least partially explained by the fact that the letters were for non-interviewed applicants.

Due to many of the letters containing statements, or other features, which could possibly be considered as some types of refusals, table 5 presents an inductively formulated categorisation of these characteristics. Two types of potential refusals were identified: 1) no-reply sender addresses and 2) actual refusals of further explanations or personal feedback. The plus signs indicate that these features, while not necessarily refusals themselves, existed in conjunction with the aforementioned refusals.

Table 5 Characteristics related to refusal

TYPES OF REFUSAL	FREQUENCY	
	106 = all letters	
	f	f/106
No-reply e-mail address	42	39.6%
+ Contact person signature	12	11.3%
+ Any contact information	2	1.9%
+ Selection criteria	1	0.9%
Refusal of further information or feedback	5	4.7%
+ No-reply sender address	3	2.8%
+ Selection criteria	2	1.9%

42 (39.6%) letters were sent from a no-reply e-mail address (such as noreply@companyname.com), and some of them included a statement in the body text notifying the recipient that the message could not be directly replied to. While 12 of these letters were signed by a contact person, only two gave any kind of contact information, and in both of these cases it was of the HR department instead of an individual. The remaining 30 no-reply messages were signed by the HR department, a talent acquisition/recruitment team, or the employer organisation in general. Only one of these letters offered information on the selection criteria. The popular use of no-reply e-mail addresses was also pointed out by Keckman (2017, 60) in her findings.

Compared to the letters which made an offer of further assistance, almost an equal number, 5 units, took the opposite route and informed the recipient that the organisation would not be responding to inquiries about personal feedback and/or the selection process (e.g. "Unfortunately, it is not possible for us to give individual feedback"). Three of these letters were sent from a no-reply address. However, it should be noted that two of the letters refusing to offer further information did contain an explanation detailing selection criteria.

6 CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Explanation-provision in employment rejection letters

The purpose of this study was to examine explanation-provision in employment rejection letters to non-interviewed external applicants from the perspective of the employer brand. Figure 6 showcases a simplified and hypothetical model of the main conclusions to the first research question, which was about how explanation-provision in employment rejection letters is connected to the employer brand. The question was approached by conducting a brief literature review on relevant theories.

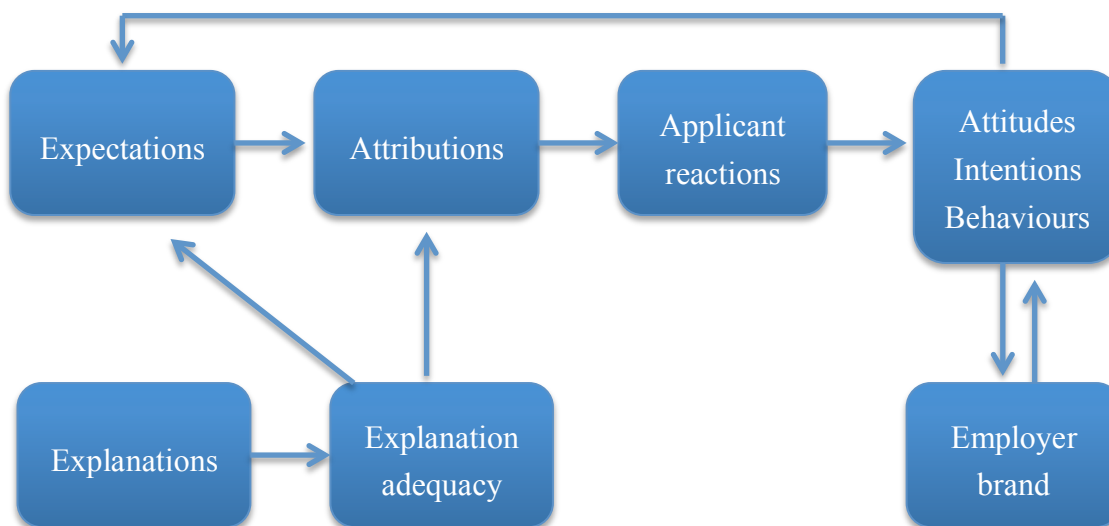


Figure 6 Connection between explanations and the employer brand

The connection between explanation-provision and the employer brand was viewed through a combination of theories on applicant reactions, employer brand, and explanations (chapters 2 and 3). Explanations have been shown to affect applicant reactions indirectly through different mediators (Bobocel & Zdaniuk 2005, 479). People's individual expectations may directly determine their attributions, which in turn may lead directly to applicant reactions (McCarthy et al. 2017, 1699–1700). Explanations can work to support the formation of attributions that link the negative outcome to factors that are internal, stable, and controllable to the applicant (Ababneh et al. 2014, 125). Furthermore, expectations not only affect how explanations are interpreted, but explanations also affect future expectations. The influence that

explanations have on fairness perceptions is increased when a negative selection outcome is unexpected (Ployhart & Harold 2004, 87), and their use may affect overall fairness perceptions by influencing the applicant's fairness heuristic (Van Den Bos 2001, 65–66). Applicant reactions have an effect on individuals' attitudes, intentions, and behaviours (McCarthy et al. 2017, 1714), and positive or negative reactions towards the selection process may also generate positive or negative reactions towards the organisation (Bauer et al. 2006, 610) while also affecting future expectations. This can affect the employer brand, which, in turn, influences applicants' attitudes, intentions, and behaviours (Cable & Turban 2001; Chapman et al. 2005, 11).

The second question focused on the proportion of rejection letters containing at least one explanation for the negative selection decision, and the third question focused on emerging patterns in the context of explanation-provision in rejection letters. Figure 7 exhibits a summary of the main findings for the research questions 2 and 3, with percentages rounded to exclude decimals. The percentages indicate the proportions of the data.

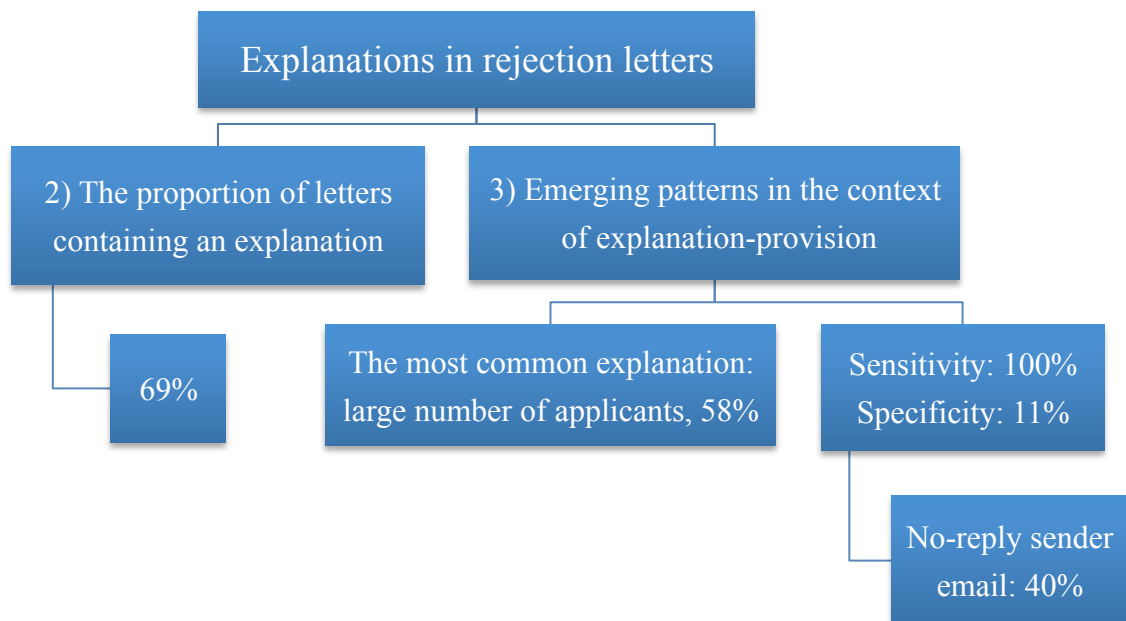


Figure 7 Explanation-provision in the data

The empirical analysis of 106 rejection letters to non-interviewed external applicants revealed that explanations are quite prevalent in this type of organisational communication: close to 69% of the letters offered some form of reasoning for the negative selection decision while around 31% simply indicated that the job-seeker had

been unsuccessful, without any statements explaining why. Ryan and Ployhart (2000, 601) speculated that the most commonly used explanation in employment rejection letters is the boilerplate “there were many more qualified applicants than openings”, and the findings of study were in line with their prediction: the most popular explanation was one describing a large number, and often also high quality, of job applicants. It was included in around 58% of the total sample. Taking into account the rather similar findings in previous studies on rejection letters (i.e. Eckberg 1984, 343; Furlong & Furlong 1994, 94–95; Shaw 2000, 36; Devici and Pasha-Zaidi 2017, 435; Keckman 2017, 47), it could be concluded that a reference to the size (and often also the quality) of the applicant pool is one of the most common, if not the most common, type of explanation in this kind of organisational communication in a low-context cultural environment. However, this conclusion depends on how an explanation is defined.

In this study, a reference to a large applicant pool was categorised as an excuse, following in the footsteps of previous research (see, for example, McCarthy et al. 2017, 9), since the responsibility for the negative selection decision is partially shifted onto mitigating circumstances. However, it is possible that not all letters that referred to the number of applicants intended to use that statement as an excuse – or as an explanation at all. When Gilliland et al. (2001, 685, 690) tested reactions to different types of explanations in employment rejection letters, they offered a reference to a large number of applicants both as a could-reducing explanation and as a would-reducing explanation; in the could-reducing explanation the focus was on a lack of resources, whereas in the would-reducing explanation the high quality of the applicant pool, as well as of the chosen applicant, were highlighted. In other words, a statement about a high number of qualified applicants was not only used as an excuse but also as a justification.

Perceptions about the efficacy of this kind of explanation vary: Furlong and Furlong (1994, 95) suggested that it makes no difference to the rejected applicant whether there were 2 or 2000 applicants if he or she personally was unsuccessful, and Eckberg (1984, 345, 348) saw the mention of a large applicant pool as a way of signalling helplessness: “...departments are portrayed as necessarily not fully in control of recruitment”, and so “if the department cannot consider *this* candidate, it is not to be blamed.” In addition, Barešová (2008, 111) suspected that the unsuccessful applicant might easily draw the conclusion that compliments made about the quality of the applicant pool do not apply to him or her if he or she was not even called for an interview. On the other hand, Ployhart, Ehrhart, and Hayes (2005, 289, 291) argued that rejected applicants react

positively towards information that tells them they are not alone in the unfavourable situation, since it caters to their self-serving bias by helping them to attribute their rejection to external instead of internal causes.

Since explanations have been found to improve fairness perceptions only when they are considered adequate, adequacy was analysed by following the sensitivity- and specificity-related conceptualisation from previous studies (chapter 3.2.2). Characteristics interpreted as conveying sensitivity were found in 100% of the sample, since all letters contained aspects related to politeness, albeit to a varying degree. On the other hand, specificity in the substance of explanations was significantly less prevalent than sensitivity in the form. Only around 11% of all letters contained an explanation that was seen as specific; they either detailed selection criteria or offered informative feedback about the applicant. However, since Jablin and Krone (1984, 403) found a higher frequency of more specific explanations in their sample of rejection letters to interviewed applicants, the findings of this study could be, at least partially, explained by the fact that the letters were for non-interviewed applicants. If, however, non-interviewed external applicants are assumed to hold less knowledge about the organisation, the contents of their rejection letters might have a stronger impact on their overall perception of the employer (Lind 2001; Cable & Turban 2001).

There was a mentionable division in how the letters indicated the employer's stance for further communication: while some included a statement about how the applicant was welcome to contact the organisation for more information, some explicitly discouraged the applicant from inquiring about personal feedback. Also, a clear pattern in the sample was that almost 40% of all letters had been sent from an organisational no-reply e-mail address which means that these messages could not be directly replied to. In addition, only 2 of these letters offered any contact information. This not only makes it more difficult for the recipient to inquire about the rejection, but it could also be speculated to have an impact on sensitivity-perceptions. However, research on the phenomenon of no-reply e-mails appears to be almost non-existent.

Based on the findings of this study, explanations seem to be offered in most employment rejection letters from MNEs to non-interviewed external applicants in a low-context environment, and they are delivered using informational sensitivity, but their informational substance, or specificity, appears to be low. This could mean decreased fairness perceptions when it comes to informational justice. When this is coupled with the popular use of no-reply e-mail addresses, it remains largely unclear

whether the explanations provided are actually creating positive applicant reactions or not. Furthermore, no matter how a reference to a large applicant pool is categorised, the fact that it seems to be the go-to explanation for so many organisations raises some questions. There is a possibility it may have to do what Sitkin and Bies (1993, 366) called "the seduction of easy excuses": ambiguous and generic explanations might be more effortless, especially when it comes to mass-communication, yet the benefits of adequate explanations might not be reaped if the focus is on avoiding negative reactions instead of pursuing positive reactions. In addition, if the goal of employer branding is to promote the qualities that make the MNE appear desirable and distinct in comparison to other employers (Lievens, Van Hove & Anseel 2007, 48), sending out rejection letters with generic and overused explanations might not support those efforts. Also, since explanations that are perceived as inadequate may trigger more negative reactions than if no explanation was given at all (Shaw et al. 2003, 446, 451), it could be argued that the focus should always be on the provision of adequate explanations instead of any explanations – especially when the recipient of the letter represents the largest group of rejected job seekers, the non-interviewed applicant, and on the external labour market. After all, investing in practices that improve applicant reactions may just end up improving the employer brand as well.

6.2 Practical implications

Since different studies, this included, have found the most popular explanation in employment rejection letters to be one that describes the number of applications or applicants, and its use appears to be potentially wide-spread across different sectors of the economy, this raises questions about the threat of adequacy-related consequences. An overused explanation may become a part of rejected applicants' baseline-expectations, which could have an effect on the way it is perceived. Also, since the explanations in the data were generally provided in a sensitive way but lacked informational substance, there is a risk that this could be perceived unfavourably as manipulative "sugar-coating". In essence, based on the findings, the biggest gap between research-backed suggestions and actual practices seems to be in the lack of specificity in explanations. While the provision of personal feedback could be challenging when the applicant pool is big, information about the general selection criteria could be added into a form letter and sent out in bulk. This may not help

applicants feel less “like a number”, but it could increase adequacy perceptions towards explanations. Also, since generic statements about the size of the applicant pool are common, offering more informative explanations might also be a way of eliciting positive reactions by standing out from the masses.

While the effect of no-reply e-mail addresses on applicant reactions has not been studied, it might be reasonable to suggest that there may be a conflict between the increasing trend of rejected applicants contacting organisations for more selection information and rejection letters being sent from addresses that make this interaction more challenging. Instead of making it more difficult for the applicant to make contact with the organisation, providing adequate explanations in rejection letters could lessen the need for further communication in the first place.

A primary determinant for how an applicant reacts to a selection is how the selection outcome turns out for them: in essence, whether or not they are hired. Turning down job applicants is inevitable, yet, with fair practices, organisations may be able to alleviate negative applicant reactions. While it may not be sensible to suggest one-size-fits-all solutions spanning all rejection letters regardless of context, since there are plenty of different contextual factors affecting the outcome, the support for the reaction generalisability hypothesis indicates that it might be well-advised for organisational decision-makers to seriously consider practical implications put forward by applicant reactions researchers.

Since the empirical data of this study were gathered in Finland, a rather homogenous low-context culture, and also since the theoretical background was predominantly from other low-context cultures, it may be more likely that the findings of this research would be more suited to be applied, although very cautiously, to other low-context, as opposed to high-context, cultures. It is highly possible that both the theory and the empirics in this study would have turned out quite differently had the context of the study been a significantly more high-context culture.

6.3 Theoretical contribution

While content analysis is more focused on description, and it usually does not aim to develop theory (Drisko & Maschi 2015, 83), some patterns emerged in the findings that highlighted a potential discrepancy between theory and practice. As Truxillo et al.

(2004, 47, 50) pointed out, research on selection fairness has largely been conducted in laboratory settings, which inevitably offer a very simplified environment in comparison to the richness of the natural world. They suggested that selection fairness researchers should move out on the field more and focus on areas where unfair treatment is most commonly found in order for research to offer the greatest utility for practice.

This study is one of a few to analyse explanations in authentic employment rejection letters. Various types of explanations have been offered in laboratory settings, yet it appears that these explanations are quite different from the ones that are most commonly offered in the real world. This might reflect a gap between research and practice, so it could be fruitful to do more research on the discrepancy between research-backed suggestions on explanation-provision and actual practices, as well as on the underlying reasons behind it. Furthermore, if the most common explanation is one referring to the size of the applicant pool, it would make sense to study applicant reactions towards it in field settings. While the connection between explanation-provision and the employer brand was only very crudely theorized, with compelling evidence links like this could potentially contribute towards creating more organisational interest towards academic research literature.

Much of the literature on rejection letters has been written before e-mail became the primary media in organisational communication. Accordingly, the adequacy factors in relation to explanations in rejection letters have been determined based on features of traditional letters. E-mail correspondence includes some unique but fundamental aspects which are not present in the regular mail, such as the form of the sender's e-mail address; since almost 40% of the 106 letters in this study were sent from a no-reply address, it raises questions about the perceived sensitivity of these messages. Similarly, e-mail communication tends to be less formal than traditional mail (Baron 1998, 147), and while some structural characteristics, such as the sender's contact information, might be an integral part of traditional business letters, the findings of this study indicate that e-mail rejection letters may be more prone to lack these. This could potentially have an impact on applicants' sensitivity perceptions. It should also be studied whether the use of no-reply addresses is actually perceived as a refusal, as was speculated in this study, and whether it could be related to the concept of cyberostracism, which deals with being ignored over the Internet (Williams, Cheung & Choi 2000).

6.4 Evaluation of the study

Critical evaluation is an integral part of research, but there is a lack of consensus on how to best judge the quality of a research based on content analysis. Some argue that the same criteria which is used to evaluate many qualitative and quantitative studies – *validity* and *reliability* – should be applied, yet others call for the use of different criteria (Bengtsson 2016, 13). The most commonly used criteria for evaluating qualitative content analysis is the concept of *trustworthiness*, developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) (Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen & Kyngäs 2014, 2). The goal of trustworthiness is to support the argument that the findings of a study are "worth paying attention to", and it is pursued through five criteria: *credibility*, how well the data fit the purpose of the study, *dependability*, the stability of the data over time, *conformability*, the objectivity or neutrality of the study, *transferability*, the generalisability of the findings, and *authenticity*, the extent to which a range of realities are presented (Lincoln & Guba 1985). According to Bengtsson (2016, 13), credibility can be seen to represent validity, while dependability corresponds to reliability, and transferability to generalisability. However, no matter how trustworthiness is approached, it is supported by careful and accurate reporting of the process of content analysis (Elo et al. 2014, 2, 8).

While this study pursued trustworthiness by discussing a range of theories, by attempting to decrease subjectivity in analysis with deductively created categorisations, by comparing the findings to past research, and by exercising caution in conclusions, its design results in some inevitable limitations. First of all, categorising linguistic concepts, such as explanations, is never objective, and the concept of perception is highly subjective. Also, basing the study on existing theories may cause the researcher to approach the data with a strong bias, and it may result in contextual aspects of the phenomenon being more easily ignored or disregarded (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, 1283). As the literature-review of this study covered multiple different theories, it is possible that, in the end, none of them was addressed in adequate depth in order to derive meaningful conclusions. In addition, the contents of rejection letters are not limited to the aspects discussed in this study, and while some characteristics, such as letter length or multiple explanations, were purposely left out of the focal scope, it is possible that some other important aspects were simply not acknowledged.

In many ways, the findings of this study appear to resemble those reported in previous studies on employment rejection letters, even when the samples have been collected in very different contexts – although, it should be noted that all of the referenced studies were conducted in low-context cultures. However, while it may be interpreted as a sign that the employment rejection letter follows some significant cross-contextual norms, the transferability, or external validity, of this study cannot be, with a good conscience, declared anything other than likely insufficient; an adequate level of saturation in the data could not be proven, since the sample size of 106 sampling units was likely too small to capture significant variations.

The trustworthiness of this study is also limited by other aspects of the data. The qualities of the participants are likely to be connected to the qualities of the data. The sample may also have included some letters which had been received as a response to an open application instead of a solicited application, since it is possible that some participants' memories of certain recruitment processes were corrupted due to time passed. Furthermore, the possibility remains that one or more participants purposely, due to personal reasons, chose to refrain from handing in some letters that would have qualified for analysis. For example, letters containing highly personal information on the reasons of rejection could potentially be considered too sensitive to share, and if the participants of this study knowingly filtered out sampling units which would have qualified for analysis, the results of this study may have been affected. Also, since job interviews are not the only selection procedure existing, it is possible that some participants had taken part in other recruitment and selection activities before the rejection.

Since the sample consisted of 84 letters that were in Finnish and 22 letters that were in English, linguistic variances may have affected the analysis. Similarly, since most of the research on applicant reactions has been conducted in the United States (Ryan & Ployhart 2014, 709) it is possible that some of the research referenced in this study cannot be strictly applied to the Northern European context due to cultural differences. However, as already mentioned, contextual variabilities in applicant reactions have been found to be rather small. Furthermore, since it is possible that many organisations prefer other mediums than e-mail, such as phone calls, when communicating negative selection decisions to rejected job applicants, and due to the qualities of the participants affecting the data, the results of this study cannot be taken as any kind of reflection of the state of applicant rejection in general.

7 SUMMARY

The role of the employer brand is highlighted for multinational organisations in the growing and global competition for talent. Applicant reactions towards selection procedures can lead to multiple different consequences for an organisation and its image, which makes a case for investing in fair selection practices. Furthermore, job seekers not only report dissatisfaction with increasingly automated, and subsequently increasingly impersonal, selection systems, but they are also showing more initiative in wanting to learn why their application was turned down. The strategy of providing explanations is one of the most consistently proven tools to influence applicant reactions. However, while the theoretical field of giving explanations to job applicants has expanded, it has also grown more fragmented, since no unified approach has been taken. In addition, little seems to be known about what is actually happening in the real world, since only a handful of studies have analysed authentic rejection letters, and many of them are from before the main medium for organisational communication became the Internet.

The purpose of this study was to *examine explanation-provision in rejection letters to non-interviewed external job applicants from the perspective of the employer brand*, and the purpose was approached through three questions:

- 1) *How is explanation-provision in employment rejection letters connected to the employer brand?*
- 2) *What proportion of rejection letters to non-interviewed external job applicants contains one or more explanations for the negative selection decision?*
- 3) *What patterns emerge in the context of explanation-provision in rejection letters to non-interviewed external job applicants?*

The first question was approached through a brief literature review on relevant theories, while the two other questions were answered by conducting a content analysis on 106 authentic employment rejection letters. The letters represented 84 different multinational organisations, and they were originally sent to non-interviewed external job applicants in Finland. The analysis was mainly conducted deductively and the contents of the letters were reflected with the findings of previous studies. The primary categorisations centred around excuses, justifications, and explanation adequacy.

By combining different theories, it was speculated that explanation-provision in rejection letters may be connected to the employer brand through applicants' justice

expectations and attributional processes. The aforementioned two influence applicant reactions, and the potential effects of applicants' attitudes, intentions, and behaviours might have implications for the brand.

The empirical analysis found that almost 70% of the rejection letters contained one or more explanations for the negative selection decision. However, closer analysis on the letters revealed that while the explanations were generally delivered in a sensitive style, as the letters were rich in politeness in their message and form, the explanations themselves were largely lacking in informational substance: selection criteria were specified in one in ten letters, and personally addressed feedback was even more of a rarity. By far, the most common type of explanation was a generic statement referring to a high number of applicants, often coupled with a description about the quality of this applicant pool. This kind of explanation was included in almost 60% of the data, and it was categorised as an excuse. It was also discovered that almost 40% of the rejection letters were sent from an organisational no-reply e-mail address, and almost all of them with no contact information, making it more difficult for applicants to contact the employer for further information.

Based on previous research and the findings of this study, while it seems that many MNEs operating in a low-context environment provide explanations in their rejection letters to non-interviewed external applicants, there might be a possibility that not all of these explanations are considered adequate by the people who receive them. It appears that there may exist some level of dissonance between job applicants' appetite for selection information and what organisations serve them in their rejection letters, and if enough rejected applicants are unhappy with this communication, the potential consequences for the employer brand might not be favourable.

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