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Between the Lines: Decoding Signaling Differences in Public and Private Sector Job Advertisements

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ABSTRACT

To compete in the “war for talent,” public sector employers must demonstrate advantages over private employers. While public service motivation (PSM) predicts sector preference, scholars disagree on whether public employers (can) effectively signal PSM in job advertisements. Consequently, this article examines how public and private job advertisements differ in language. We collected 5000 advertisements from both sectors and performed natural language processing (NLP) and qualitative content analysis. Both sectors use specialized language that can narrow the applicant pool. PSM signals appear more often in the public sector, but affective motives are rarely communicated; instead, self-sacrifice is framed as a legal obligation. Public sector advertisements adopt a rational tone instead of explaining purpose and societal value. Legally mandated, saturated signals may be perceived as low-cost and ineffective. The findings explain the mixed results concerning PSM signaling and underscore the gap between theory and practice in PSM-related recruitment efforts.

Despite being perceived as an attractive employer (Cordes and Vogel 2023), the public sector is struggling to compete in the “war for talent” against the private sector (Lewis and Frank 2002). Research has shown that skilled applicants avoid public sector jobs (Fowler and Birdsall 2019). Even among public administration students with high levels of *public service motivation* (PSM), interest in pursuing a public-sector career is declining (Bright and Graham 2015). This provides ample evidence for between-sector competition in the job market and raises the question of how public sector organizations address potential job applicants (Ritz and Waldner 2011). Wilden et al. (2010) have hypothesized that greater brand clarity (i.e., sector differentiation) increases the credibility of an employer’s hiring practices and attractiveness. Thus, several scholars have called for a unique “public service brand” to promote differences from the private sector (Ritz et al. 2016).

Job advertisements are an essential source of information for shaping an employer’s brand and helping job candidates to build their knowledge of potential employers (Cable and Turban 2001). Recent studies have explored different motivational signals in job advertisements that should help mitigate the public sector’s (dis-)advantages by focusing recruitment efforts on a narrow target group of favorably motivated individuals (Vogel et al. 2024; Asseburg and Homberg 2020). Accordingly, scholars have proposed using PSM (signals) for employer branding to recruit PSM-oriented individuals (Christensen et al. 2017). Research suggests that individuals with high levels of PSM are more likely to self-select into public sector employment (Vandenabeele and Jager 2020). This is important because the public sector seems to fall behind the private sector’s offerings when it comes to “hard” attributes such as salaries (Lee and Choi 2016). Yet, experimental results

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Evidence for Practice

- Affective dimensions of PSM (e.g., working in shifts as an act of self-sacrifice) are framed as given and legal obligations in public job advertisements, which may discourage PSM-oriented individuals.
- Improving the inspirational quality of job advertisements (i.e., explaining “why” something is required and why it is important instead of “what”) could improve the effectiveness of job advertisements.
- Be aware that an overly inspirational tone may come across as superficial and could even have the opposite effect.
- Signaling incentives that are required by law, such as “salary increase according to labor agreements” and signals that are saturated in the public sector (e.g., “We serve the public interest”), may be perceived as low-cost and thus ineffective.

with employer branding in the public sector indicate that PSM signals are not as effective as expected (Vogel et al. 2024; Keppeler and Papenfuß 2021; Weske et al. 2020). One possible explanation is that PSM signals are not as unique as assumed or are framed in a way that fails to attract PSM-oriented individuals. Asseburg et al. (2018) argue that only inspirationally framed messages in job advertisements impact the intention to apply. Although instrumental attributes such as pay and working hours are often limited by legal constraints in the public sector (Sievert et al. 2020), organizations can determine how they communicate them. Hence, we pose the following research question:

How and to What Extent Do Public and Private Job Advertisements Differ in Their Language, Particularly Regarding PSM Signals?

Prior studies analyzing the content of real job advertisements have relied on manual coding of small samples within a narrow context (Waldner 2012) or applied keyword-based approaches (Vogel et al. 2024). We take a different approach by deriving clusters directly from the text corpus instead of relying on an ex-ante dictionary. This aims to complement existing research by reducing the likelihood of reinforcing public vs. private sector narratives and instead shedding light on what employers communicate in practice. The literature has not explored signals in job advertisements in a natural setting, nor has it examined whether public sector employers apply unique linguistic cues (Korac et al. 2018). Prior research assumes that public organizations communicate PSM in a way that is credible and motivationally compelling. Yet, we know little about how PSM is translated into recruitment language. Therefore, the “way[s] to deliver the brand [PSM] message” (Backhaus 2016, 199) are unknown. This matters for employer branding research, both to explain the mixed results concerning PSM signaling and to inform its strategic use (Bromberg and Charbonneau 2020). For practice, language is (often) easier to adapt than actual instrumental or even symbolic attributes of an organization. Consequently, this article aims to highlight the ‘quick wins’ that public sector organizations can

achieve by improving the language of job advertisements concerning PSM signals.

To address these gaps, we collected 5000 job advertisements from both the public and private sectors and employed *natural language processing* (NLP) techniques as called for by Vogel et al. (2024). In addition, we systematically examined what Vogel et al. (2024) describe as “predefined phrases and officialese” (p. 2883) and compared their prevalence across sectors to assess whether such language functions as a distinctive signal between sectors. We applied corpus comparison methods, automatic clustering, and manual qualitative content analysis to identify themes from the corpus itself. Significant differences in the frequency of terms across the two sectors revealed themes that could act as PSM signals to job applicants. This ex-post clustering approach allows us to capture signaling as it emerges from the job advertisements at a scale not previously possible, serving as a triangulation and reliability check for other studies in the field (Waldner 2012).

We found significant language differences between public and private job advertisements, notably a higher frequency of PSM signals in the public sector. This serves as a necessary foundation for better recruitment following a differentiation strategy. Yet, while public sector job advertisements typically employ a rational messaging tone (Asseburg et al. 2018), private sector advertisements are more inspirational in tone. Building on Wightman and Christensen (2024), who find that value-based fit is influential at the sector level, it is plausible that the public sector’s current use of PSM signals is losing its effectiveness (Somers and Desmidt 2026). This underscores a broader gap between theory and practice in human resource (HR) management generally and PSM specifically (Christensen et al. 2017; Ritz et al. 2016).

1 | Recruitment and Job Advertisements

Organizations highlight attributes, characteristics, and qualities in job advertisements to attract potential job applicants (Cable and Yu 2006). Therefore, job advertisements may be regarded as artifacts describing how an organization wants to be perceived (Rafaeli and Oliver 1998). They frame how potential applicants construct an employer image through sensemaking processes (Auer et al. 2021). The order and placement of typical elements of a job advertisement influence what applicants notice and disregard initially (Weick et al. 2005). From a sensemaking perspective, an image is created by “noticing and bracketing” (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2020) individual cues under ambiguity and linking them together to form a coherent interpretation that informs action. This underscores the significance of both the content and the structure of an advertisement, as well as the language used.

Relating to the structure, Rafaeli and Oliver (1998) describe what *elements* are typically present in job advertisements: organizational identity, human resources needs, requirements, and contact. Organizational benefits, such as pay, working conditions, training, and promotional opportunities, present an additional incentives element (Petry et al. 2022). These elements serve as an “information skeleton” to “structure the

societal abstraction of employment into its separate elements” (Rafaeli 2006, 766), building employer knowledge (Petry et al. 2022).

Many organizations fail to highlight a distinct employer brand and specific attributes compared to other competitors (Backhaus 2004). For instance, Waldner (2012), in his study of job advertisements for lawyers in both sectors, found a significant overlap in job requirements and benefits between sectors. Thus, research on recruitment practices agrees that employers should manipulate the content of recruitment messages to make them more appealing (Rynes 1991). Even slight differences affect the perception of job advertisements (Linos 2018). Hence, careful wording is crucial to attract those who are starting their job search and have little knowledge of potential employers (De Cooman and Pepermans 2012). Consequently, Backhaus (2016) called for more research on the distinctiveness of employer brands.

A growing body of research investigates the effect of language and information in public sector job advertisements (Sievert, Buongiorno Sottoriva, and van den Bekerom 2025; Sievert, Vogel, and Döring 2025; Vogel et al. 2024; Lee and Jilke 2023; Keppeler and Papenfuß 2021; Sievert et al. 2020; Asseburg and Homberg 2020; Linos 2018). The underlying assumption is that the design and content of job advertisements influence the perceived attractiveness of an organization and the likelihood of an application.

Signaling Theory, which explains the principal-agent problem in the job market (Spence 1973), describes the mechanisms of attraction in the recruiting process. Employers (principals) cannot perfectly observe the abilities of job applicants (agents) before hiring. Additionally, applicants lack complete information about the qualities of a job and the work environment. The decision-making process for both employers and applicants involves uncertainty and requires investment from both sides, creating an adverse selection situation (Connelly et al. 2011). Both employers and applicants are motivated to bridge the information gap by providing each other with the necessary information. Rynes (1991) argues that job applicants interpret information in job advertisements as signals, that is, linguistic cues of organizational attributes. Changing attributes perceived as signals creates “costs” for the organization (Spence 1973), for example, introducing a performance-related pay system to signal competitiveness. Connelly et al. (2024) summarize that signaling costs are an important metric to assign importance to signals by receivers. Both organizations and candidates try to identify “honest signals,” which are “costly or hard-to-fake,” to overcome adverse selection (Bangerter et al. 2012). “Low-cost” signals are more straightforward to adapt but could indicate lower capabilities and productivity without solving the principal-agent problem.

Accordingly, expectations are a key mechanism for shaping employee perceptions and subsequent job search outcomes (Rynes and Lawler 1983). Previous research has shown that organizations are viewed as having less integrity when they display incongruent signals (Connelly et al. 2024). Feldman et al. (2006) experimentally demonstrated that message specificity increases the appeal of job advertisements. Furthermore, violating the

expectations of job applicants has a negative impact on their intention to apply (Steigenberger 2025).

2 | Public Service Motivation and Messaging Tone in Job Advertisements

Public sector HR departments operate in a regulated environment where rules and practices are formalized (Boselie et al. 2019). Despite the influence of managerial reforms in the public sector over the past decade(s), HRM policies and practices are distinct from those in the private sector (Knies and Steijn 2021). Accordingly, the public sector uses passive recruitment through publicly available job advertisements to ensure transparency and equal access to public positions (Vogel et al. 2024; Siegel and Proeller 2021). In contrast, the private sector also targets specific individuals. This distinction emphasizes the need for research focused on the exploration of job advertisements as the primary recruitment source for the public sector.

Asseburg et al. (2018) argue that signals can be transmitted and framed rationally using logical arguments and facts or inspirationally if the message has an emotional appeal. Although content is arguably an important feature of a job advertisement, Mahjoub and Kruijen (2021) and Somers and Desmidt (2026) identified style and language as equally important factors for attractiveness. Asseburg et al. (2018) found that only inspirationally framed messages in job advertisements impacted the intention to apply for a public sector job. In the German context, Wagner (1984) found evidence of a specialized language (coll. “*Beamtendeutsch*”) that is distinct from the general written language. Originating from historical, legal, and organizational artifacts, this language is characterized by its formal, impersonal, and functional style.

Furthermore, numerous scholars have suggested that PSM (language) should be used to attract suitable personnel for the public sector (Christensen et al. 2017; Ritz et al. 2016). Yet, scholars raised doubts regarding the influence of PSM (Van de Walle et al. 2015) and its limited effectiveness for a general audience (Keppeler and Papenfuß 2021; Weske et al. 2020). Perry (1996) assumed that PSM is based on three common human motives—*affective*, *normative*, and *rational*—and can be conceptualized along four dimensions. While the dimension *attraction to policy-making* (APM) serves a rational need, *commitment to the public interest* (CPI) is based on normative assumptions, and *compassion* (COM) as well as *self-sacrifice* (SS) follow affective motives (Wright et al. 2013; Vandenabeele 2008).

Based on this understanding, Brewer et al. (2000) observed that PSM manifests through different combinations of motives rather than representing a homogeneous orientation. Subsequent research has expanded upon the original PSM conceptualization by emphasizing the interaction between individual motives, identity, and the institutional context of public service (Vandenabeele et al. 2014). For instance, Kim and Vandenabeele (2010) refined the original distinction between the three motives because they could not be sufficiently distinguished from one another.

This development also shifted attention toward PSM being socialized through institutions, whose values and logics become incorporated into individuals' social identities (Vandenabeele et al. 2014). More recently, PSM has been theorized as a "public service moral identity," meaning public values become part of how individuals define themselves and can guide their behavior when this identity is salient and activated (Ripoll 2019). Accordingly, individuals must encounter situations and organizational environments that allow them to act on their public values.

Wightman and Christensen (2024) argue that a value-based fit-equilibrium between PSM predisposition and socialization should have an impact at the sector level because the foundation of PSM is rooted in a broader institutional identity (Taylor et al. 2022). Relatedly, Ripoll et al. (2025) show that public values function as a symbolic attribute of public service jobs, and their influence on attractiveness increases the higher the level of PSM of applicants. Consequently, more recent work understands attraction to public service as identification with public values that organizations and institutions signal and enable individuals to enact (Ripoll and Breugh 2025; Ritz et al. 2023). Accordingly, in between-sector job competition, organizations should signal traits and values (i.e., PSM for the public sector) that align with those of the individuals they wish to recruit.

Therefore, the theory of PSM is closely related to the *Attraction-Selection-Attrition* (ASA) model, which suggests individuals are attracted to organizations that match their values and motivations (Wright and Christensen 2010). This self-selection process is believed to result in a workforce more aligned with the mission and values of public sector organizations. Although the actual effect of PSM on the attractiveness of public sector employment is a matter of debate (Christensen and Wright 2011), other scholars have found positive effects (Ritz et al. 2023; Asseburg and Homberg 2020; Vandenabeele and Jager 2020), albeit sometimes only for specific dimensions (Pedersen 2013). Since PSM seems to decline with tenure (Schott et al. 2018), it is more important to target people in the labor market who initially score high on PSM (Christensen et al. 2017). Although PSM is one of the central topics of public administration research, evidence for an active and strategic use of PSM in recruitment is scarce (Bromberg and Charbonneau 2020). Moreover, while it is generally agreed that PSM strongly indicates sector preference, scholars disagree over whether public sector employers (can) effectively signal PSM in job advertisements (Keppeler and Papenfuß 2021; Weske et al. 2020).

Of course, superficial references to public values and PSM ("We serve the public interest") can easily be mimicked. Thus, they can be considered low-cost signals that are subject to institutional isomorphism and decoupling, and a simple reference to public values "barely suffices to keep up" (Vandenabeele and Jager 2020, 10). In contrast, costly structural measures that organizations implement and commit to could serve as honest, hard-to-fake signals: for instance, offering paid time off for volunteering, providing prosocial incentives, or publishing transparent accountability reports could mitigate adverse selection by attracting high-PSM candidates (Connelly et al. 2024).

Additionally, many honest signals, such as pay levels or working hours, are often tied to civil service systems, legal regulations, or collective bargaining agreements and are difficult to change in the short term (Sievert et al. 2020). Within these constraints, organizations can decide how to structure and present information, which aspects to emphasize, and which details to highlight in their wording (Christensen et al. 2017).

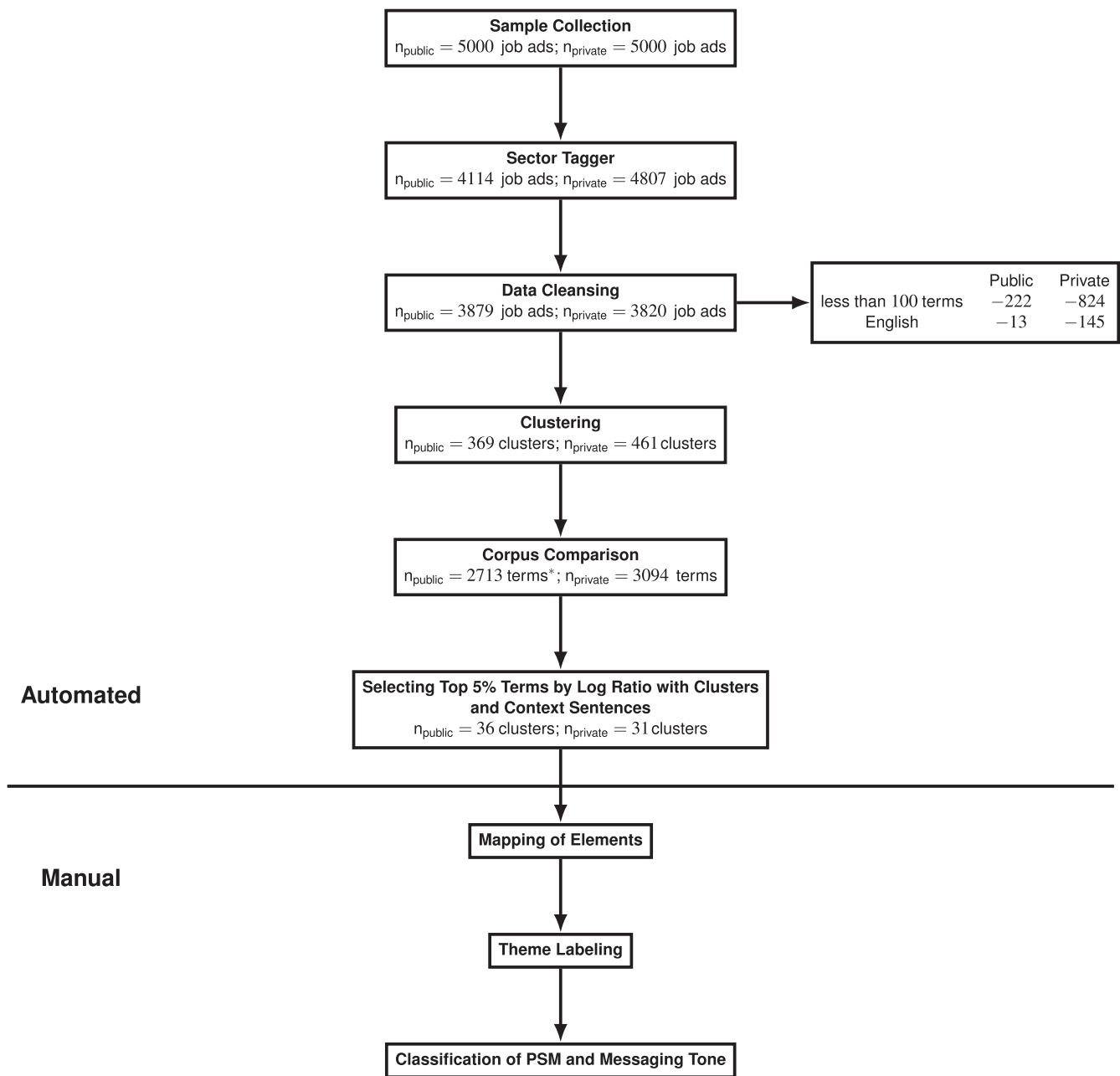
Furthermore, our analytical framework indicates that the structural elements of job advertisements should be understood as interpretive frames that guide how specific attributes can be perceived (Rafaeli 2006). Dineen and Williamson (2012) observed in their study of recruiters that job advertisements focusing on requirements improve the quality of the applicant pool. In contrast, descriptions of job tasks (i.e., the HR needs element) appear to be poor predictors of applicants' intentions to apply (Petry et al. 2022). The same PSM wording can have different meanings depending on its placement within the advertisement. For instance, references to supporting the digitization of public administration can be interpreted as descriptions of job tasks when placed in the HR needs element. In a requirements section, it may indicate expected digital competence. In the organizational identity element, however, it can signal commitment to the public. The language and messaging tone of these statements shape how the organization presents itself as an employer. Therefore, we focus on the (PSM) language used in job advertisements in the public and private sectors, extending Waldner's (2012) analysis beyond the requirements and incentive elements to include the full text of job advertisements.

3 | Methods

3.1 | Data Collection

This article combines computational methods and qualitative content analysis to detect patterns in job advertisements in an exploratory research design. We analyzed thematic clusters in the language of job advertisements, in which elements they appear, their messaging tone, and how they can be interpreted along the PSM dimensions (Figure 1). The first objective was to identify significant terminological differences between job advertisements of both sectors. We collected a sample of 5000 public job advertisements from the German state-owned job portal Interamt published between October 24, 2023, and November 5, 2023 (Gießmann 2024). Many public sector organizations post job advertisements on their websites and Interamt for a wider reach. The private job advertisement sample consisted of 5000 job advertisements obtained from the Federal Employment Agency between February 15, 2023, and November 11, 2023. Because employers can freely copy and paste their job advertisements into text fields on both portals, the choice of portal had no observable influence on how the texts were written. A saturation of unique terms became apparent above 5000 job advertisements in both sectors.

To address potential sector intermixing (Baarspul and Wilderom 2011), we developed a sector tagger and only included public and private sector organizations while excluding hybrid organizations (e.g., the non-profit sector, educational institutions, and church administration).¹ This resulted in 4114 public



* Significantly varying document frequencies between sectors with $p < .0001$.

FIGURE 1 | Research design.

sector (886; 17.72% removed) and 4819 private sector job advertisements (181; 3.62% removed). We included all types of job advertisements to generalize results for both sectors and to ensure representation of the German job market concerning job profiles, responsibilities, educational requirements, contract characteristics, and geographical areas (Appendix S1). Educational requirements differ in the sample, with the public sector demanding more university degrees (56%) than the private sector (35%). The sample reflects the distribution of the public sector, as roughly 54% of public sector employees in Germany are in jobs requiring a university degree (Statistisches Bundesamt 2023a). The distribution of educational requirements in the private sector is comparable to the distribution of educational qualifications in

the German population (Statistisches Bundesamt 2023b). The private-sector sample encompasses a diversified labor market, including both blue- and white-collar jobs, showing comparability to the public sector (Appendix S2). The natural differences between sectors may impact term frequencies (e.g., for responsibilities, educational requirements, or required working time). We took this into account when interpreting the results. Lastly, it was crucial to determine if job advertisements can be treated as ‘normal’ text when using corpus linguistics methods. According to Zipf’s law, the frequency of a term is inversely proportional to its rank in the frequency table (Powers 1998). The distribution of public and private corpora shows this characteristic.

3.2 | Data Cleansing

We cleansed the job advertisements according to Bensberg and Buscher (2016). Lemmatization was applied using the HanoverTagger, which is specialized in German (Wartena 2019). Specific terms, such as names, countries, written numbers, dates, and abbreviations, as well as stop-words, were excluded from the analysis as they do not provide explainable sector differences. We only kept job advertisements primarily written in German and removed English translations while keeping certain anglicisms such as “leadership” and “networking.”

For the statistical analysis, we calculated each term's *document frequency* (DF), which is the number of documents within the corpus where the term appears at least once. This accounts for longer job advertisements, where higher term frequency could result from the increased likelihood of repeated terms. To address the opposite, shorter job advertisements with “insufficient word co-occurrence and lack of context information” (Zheng et al. 2018, 1), we set a conservative minimum threshold of 100 terms, below which job advertisements were removed from the samples. In this way, we ensured that only high-information job advertisements were included (Collins 2007).

Further, we found that terms used by fewer than two employers were too specific to be considered general vocabulary and removed them. To address the opposite problem, terms so common in the German language that they do not provide relevant insights, we calculated the *inverse document frequency* (IDF). Based on the IDF score, we removed the lowest 10% of terms to address a potential saturation effect (Vogel et al. 2024). After these steps, we included 3879 public and 3820 private job advertisements in the analysis. This allowed for approximately equal weighting, a requirement for undistorted corpora comparison.

3.3 | Corpus Comparison

We had two objectives in the corpus analysis: First, we identified which terms *significantly* differentiate the two sectors by comparing the DF distribution of individual terms. Second, we wanted to investigate what broader themes appear in the job advertisements, their messaging tone, and whether they can be interpreted as PSM dimensions. These terms and themes have the potential to serve as unique sector signals. The terms differ in the DF value, from which the *log-likelihood* can be calculated (Rayson and Garside 2000). Because of the extensive size of the corpora, we only considered terms with significantly varying DFs at $p < 0.0001$ (critical value = 15.13 for the log-likelihood). While this approach helps control for Type I errors, the number of comparisons may increase the risk of Type II errors, meaning that differences between sectors could be overlooked. To focus on prevailing sector differences, we accepted this limitation. In addition, we used the *log ratio* as an effect size measure (Hardie 2014).

3.4 | Clustering

To compute thousands of job advertisements into “calculable terms” (Alaimo and Kallinikos 2017, 176), we relied on

hierarchical clustering based on custom distance measures (Pejic-Bach et al. 2020). In the following, we will speak of “clusters” as a technical term, while at the same time each cluster represents a meaningful theme in the qualitative analysis. We combined three distance measures to assess which terms belong to the same cluster. The first measure concerned *semantic relationships* between terms based on vectorized embeddings using the Word2Vec library. This enabled us to capture terms used in the same context, for example, the recognition of similarity between “Entgelt” and “Besoldung” (the first meaning salary for public sector employees and the second for civil servants). As a second measure, we determined the *phonetic relationship* between terms based on the longest common substring. This allowed us to identify related word stems, such as “Beamter” and “Beamtentum” (meaning civil servant and civil service). The third measure, the *thesaurus relationship*, searched for synonyms, for example, between “Weihnachtsgeld” (Christmas bonus) and “Jahressonderzahlung” (annual bonus). These three distance measurements were summed with equal weighting, forming a distance matrix. We generated a dendrogram representing the accumulated distance between terms. The dendrogram's tree-like structure allowed us to make a “cut” at a reasonable height, encompassing clusters with a high similarity based on the three distance measures. To determine a reasonable value for the cut, we created a table containing all the terms in the order of the dendrogram and their corresponding cluster. We began the process at a low height and incrementally increased the height until the delimitation contained terms of a similar theme. In total, 369 clusters were created for public job advertisements and 461 for private job advertisements, representing the themes for further analysis. Furthermore, we carried out a sequence clustering to determine which clusters were associated with the five elements of job advertisements. This allowed for a more profound insight into the context in which the themes were employed.

As we sought to report significant differences between the sectors, we refrained from interpreting all clusters. Instead, we selected the top 5% of terms based on the log ratio of clusters containing at least 10 terms. This ensured that interpretable and meaningful clusters were selected, resulting in 87 terms (in 36 clusters) from the public sector and 95 terms (in 31 clusters) from private sector job advertisements. Additionally, each sentence was ranked based on how many terms of a given cluster were present, using the terms' log ratios as weights. This allowed us to extract up to five sentences that show how a cluster is used in context, following a *keywords-in-context* (KWIC) approach. To ensure representativeness, the extracted sentences had to originate from different organizations and reach a minimum log-ratio threshold. For rarer or less pronounced clusters, fewer than five sentences were extracted. This approach allowed us to interpret the signals in a broader “signaling environment” (Connelly et al. 2011).

3.5 | Theme Labeling, Classification of PSM and Messaging Tone

To enable immediate insight into the clusters' content and further analysis, we performed a mix of labeling and classification methods. An overview of the procedure is depicted in Figure 2.

The labeling of themes is analogous to the labeling step in topic modeling, as already applied in prior public administration

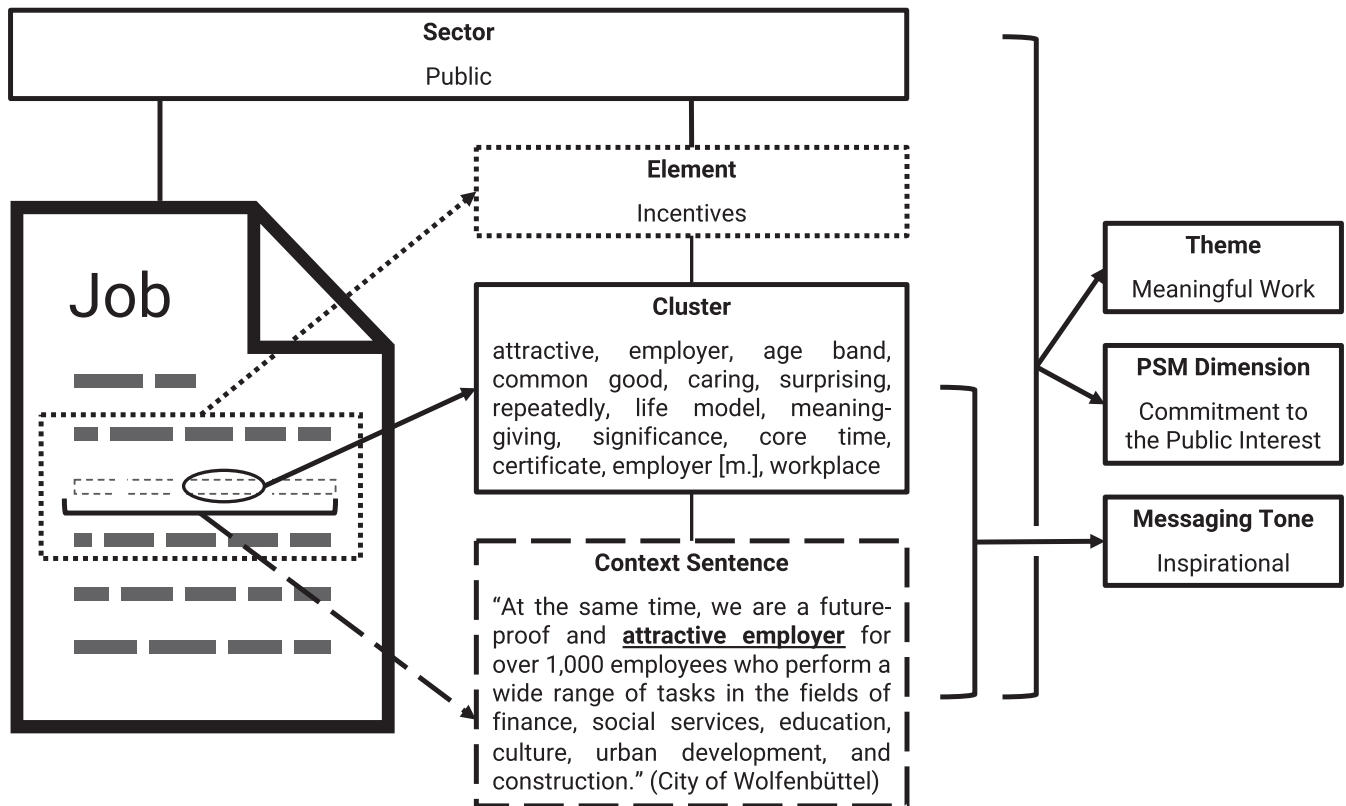


FIGURE 2 | Labeling and classification procedure.

research (Walker et al. 2019; Hollibaugh 2019). The process was carried out in three steps: First, two scholars independently and inductively assigned labels to each cluster. For the labeling, the scholars considered the uniqueness of the sector, the element in which the cluster is present, all terms within the cluster, and the context in which the cluster is used. Second, differences were resolved and exact wording was determined by consensus. Third, we used GPT-4o to generate alternative label suggestions and challenge our assumptions, without overriding human judgment.² This procedure enabled us to name all clusters, resulting in a set of themes.

Next, we classified the themes as potential signals of the four dimensions of PSM and assessed their messaging tone deductively. We relied on an ex-ante classification scheme (Supporting Information 1), as recommended by Hollibaugh (2019). Again, the classification was done independently by two scholars, and a decision was reached by consensus. Specifically, we applied operationalizations of PSM by Perry and Wise (1990), Perry (1996), Wright (2008), and Hammerschmid et al. (2009). We complemented our operationalization with the qualitative investigation of individual conceptions of PSM by Brewer et al. (2000). Finally, subsequent research (e.g., Ritz 2011) informed the boundaries of our coding and addressed the conceptual limitations of the original PSM dimensions. The messaging tone definitions were borrowed from Asseburg et al. (2018). For the classification of PSM, all available information was used (sector, element, cluster, and context). For messaging tone, only the cluster and context sentences were considered.

Because of the absence of validated dictionaries, automated classification was not possible, although such tools may be

developed from the data. We consider the messaging tone to be a dichotomous scale, as understood by Asseburg et al. (2018), being either rational or inspirational. By default, we assumed a rational tone when only factual or logical terms were used. If the wording emphasized emotional engagement, meaningfulness, or a sense of mission, we classified the messaging tone as inspirational. Inter-rater agreement between the two scholars was assessed with Cohen's kappa. The absence of PSM dimensions was treated as a purposeful code. For PSM we obtained $\kappa=0.77$ (public) and $\kappa=1.00$ (private); for messaging tone $\kappa=0.62$ (public) and $\kappa=0.87$ (private). Agreement can be considered substantial (public sector) to almost perfect (private sector).

4 | Results

4.1 | Elements

A total of 12,419 unique terms could be identified from job advertisements in both sectors. Of these, 4250 terms are shared vocabulary. Taking into account the significantly different terms ($N=5809$; 46.8%), we found 2714 terms (46.7%) for the public sector and 3095 terms (53.3%) for the private sector, which indicates balanced language differences between the sectors.³ The *sector score* (calculated as the mean of log ratios of all terms in a single job advertisement) differentiates the two sectors while showing a near-normal distribution (Appendix S3). With a Moran's I value of 0.128 ($p<0.001$), the regional effects on the postcode level are negligible, implying that the sector scores are predominantly independent of geographical location. Table 1 indicates the number of job advertisements in which we identified elements.

4.2 | Themes

Next, we present a comparative analysis of themes identified in job advertisements in the public and private sectors, organized along the five elements (Table 2). Additionally, this is visualized via two sunburst charts (Appendices S4 and S5). For better interpretability, Supporting Information 2 contains an extended list of the top 20 terms in those themes with example sentences that highlight the context in which the themes are used.

4.2.1 | Organizational Identity Element

The themes within the organizational identity element show differences between the public and private sectors. Rational terms such as “area of responsibility” and “approving authority” describe the organization’s hierarchy and accountability relating to the CPI dimension. In addition, public sector advertisements emphasize the APM dimension with the themes of local and state administration and state authority, for example, through rational terms such as “administer,” “ministry,” and “democracy.” The element also includes a social work theme, with terms such as “youth aid,” “child protection,” and “protection order,” which we coded as COM, although it is framed in a rational tone.

In contrast, private sector job advertisements emphasize their competitive goals. Inspirational terms such as “driving,” “steep,” and “risk” reflect the sector’s focus on growth and market positioning. In addition, private sector organizations emphasize their expertise in certain industries and reputation, using inspirational terms such as “renowned,” “pioneer,” and “technology.” Company descriptions frequently aim to motivate applicants, using inspirational terms such as “impact” and “inspire” to convey corporate values. Also, job advertisements emphasize sustainability, with a strong focus on “zero” and “carbon.” Yet, sustainability is framed rationally. We found no references to PSM dimensions.

4.2.2 | Human Resources Needs Element

In the public sector, several themes refer to sovereign responsibilities, including organization chart, administrative oversight, and legal and administrative tasks. Rational terms such as “division,” “procurement procedure,” “control,” “application,” “legal proceedings,” and “permission” indicate that needed positions are embedded in formal procedures and public authority,

relating to APM. Themes such as public infrastructure, education and childcare, social security, and child and family welfare point to the provision and maintenance of public goods. Terms such as “park,” “playground,” “school,” “daycare center,” “youth welfare office,” “refugee,” “basic security benefits,” and “crisis” can be interpreted as CPI, SS, or COM signals depending on the theme, even though they are generally framed in a rational tone. We coded the education and childcare theme as SS, as the positions require exceptional resilience, flexibility, and the willingness to perform duties outside of regular working hours. We did not identify any themes suggesting an imbalance in the responsibilities of the advertised job.

Private sector job advertisements, by comparison, describe human resource needs in more occupation- and industry-specific terms, spanning multiple industries from manufacturing to construction and healthcare, not relating to PSM. Rational terms such as “system planner,” “milling machine,” “bank,” “diagnosis,” “packaging,” “software test,” “KPI,” and “apprenticeship” suggest a focus on hands-on, practical tasks central to the private sector’s operations. None of these private sector themes were coded as PSM signals.

4.2.3 | Requirements Element

In the public sector, several requirement themes refer to formalized administrative and legal education, including educational pathway, administrative tenure, administrative education, and legal and technical knowledge. Rational terms such as “entry-level post,” “apprenticeship,” “tenure group,” “career examination,” “administrative training course,” “VgV,” “UVgO,” and “law” indicate a reliance on administrative qualifications and legal knowledge. We did not identify any themes that capture the higher educational requirements in the public sector, as both university degrees and apprenticeships are mentioned. Citizen orientation was coded as CPI, socio-pedagogical skills as COM, and communication and conflict management skills as SS; yet only citizen orientation and communication/conflict management are framed inspirationally, while socio-pedagogical skills are framed rationally.

Requirements in private sector advertisements are marked by anglicisms and a focus on a dynamic work environment. Inspirational terms such as “challenge,” “consulting,” and “dynamic” are common. In the private sector, personal qualities like “courageous” and “spirit” are sought, indicating a preference for proactive and bold individuals. The only other theme is IT expertise, which is rationally framed and refers to technical knowledge. Neither private sector theme was coded as PSM-related.

4.2.4 | Incentives Element

The incentives element shows that public sector advertisements combine meaningfulness, employment security, regulated pay structures, and work-life balance. The meaningful work theme is communicated inspirationally and relates to CPI, using terms such as “common good,” “meaning-giving,” and “significance.” In some municipalities, job advertisements highlight the ties

TABLE 1 | Coverage of elements in job advertisements.

Element	Public	Private
Organizational identity	2955 (76%)	2138 (56%)
Human resources needs	803 (21%)	2140 (56%)
Requirements	3581 (92%)	3717 (97%)
Incentives	3828 (99%)	2242 (59%)
Contact	3501 (90%)	1272 (33%)
<i>N</i>	3879	3820

TABLE 2 | Themes in Public and Private Sector Job Advertisements.

Element	Public sector		Private sector	
	Rational tone	Inspirational tone	Rational tone	Inspirational tone
Org. Identity	Hierarchy (CPI), Local and State Admin. (APM), Social Work (COM), State Authority (APM)		Engineering, Industry, Medical Services, Sustainability	Casual Work Environment, Company Culture, Corporate Values, Hospitality, Reputation
HR needs	Admin. Oversight (APM), Child and Family Welfare (COM), Education and Childcare (SS), Legal and Admin. Tasks (APM), Organization Chart (APM), Public Infrastructure (CPI), Social Security (COM)		Apprenticeship, Business Operations, Construction, Domain Expertise, Finance, Food Production, Healthcare, Industrial Work, Maintenance, Manufacturing, Production, Software	
Requirements	Admin. Education, Admin. Tenure, Educational Pathway, Legal and Technical Knowledge, Socio-Pedagogical Skills (COM)	Citizen Orientation (CPI), Communication and Conflict Management Skills (SS)	IT Expertise	Proactive Individuals
Incentives	Employment Status, Flexible Work and Employee Benefits, Job Sharing (SS), Part-Time Suitability, Salary Regulations, Shift and Service Commitment (SS), Supplementary Benefits	Meaningful Work (CPI), Pension Plans, Regional Appeal (CPI)		Career Development, Employment Conditions, Workplace Benefits
Contact	Application Completeness, Application Support, Bureaucratic Process, Contact Person, Equal Opportunity Compliance (COM), Formalistic Rigor, Qualification Proofs, Woman's Equal Opportunity (COM)		Application Process, Communication Channels, Cookies	Diversity and Inclusion (COM), Easy Contact

between the organization and the local region, using inspirational terms such as “flair,” “green,” “rural,” “touristic,” and “neighborhood” to underscore the appeal of the workplace. We coded such terms as potential CPI signals. Rational terms such as “remuneration table,” “tenure appointment,” and “according to the labor tariff” illustrate the structured and regulated nature of employment in this sector. Moreover, public job advertisements mention benefits related to work-life balance and public welfare, such as “telework” and “company sports.” The public sector emphasizes family-oriented benefits, including “childcare slot,” “holiday care,” and “social counseling.” One theme relates to part-time suitability, which we did not interpret as a potential PSM signal because of the higher proportion of part-time contracts in the public sector sample. The themes “shift and service commitment” and “job sharing” are coded as SS and appear with a rational messaging tone. They present employment conditions under which applicants are expected to subordinate aspects of private life to organizational needs, such as emergency availability, shift coverage, or requiring permission for part-time arrangements.

Private sector advertisements, in contrast, emphasize workplace benefits, career development, and employment conditions, all of which were coded as non-PSM and inspirational. Examples include “flexible,” “holiday allowance,” “company celebration,” “company car,” “gym-pass,” “academy,” “career plan,” “bonus payment,” “fitness offers,” and “company laptop.” Compared with the public sector, these incentives are less tied to regulated employment frameworks and more strongly framed as employer-specific benefits, development opportunities, and material or lifestyle-related perks. Yet, some overlap between the sectors exists, especially around flexible work and training opportunities.

4.2.5 | Contact Element

Public sector contact elements are characterized by rational and formalized language. Themes such as contact person, qualification proofs, formalistic rigor, application completeness, application support, and bureaucratic process use terms such as “Federal Office,” “telephone number,” “Central Office for Foreign Education,” “statement of comparability,” “closing date,” “performance record,” “missing,” “enclose,” “reply-paid envelope,” and “on paper.” Furthermore, public sector advertisements place emphasis on equal opportunity compliance and women’s equal opportunity, which job applicants could interpret as COM signals, yet using rational terms such as “equal opportunities plan,” “equal rights law,” and “lgg [abbr. state equal rights law]” to express them.

In contrast, the private sector favors a more streamlined and informal application process. The easy contact theme is inspirational and includes terms such as “WhatsApp,” “contact,” “anytime,” and “by phone,” suggesting a more direct and applicant-friendly contact. At the same time, the private sector also contains rational process themes, including communication channels, application process, and cookies, with terms such as “applicant form,” “desired salary,” “starting date,” “career page,” “postal applications,” and “website.” Private sector advertisements also include a diversity and inclusion theme, coded as COM and inspirational, using terms such as “skin color,”

“minority,” “self-expression,” “marital status,” “life phase,” and “diversity.”

4.3 | Cross-Sector Themes

We also looked at clusters with an atypical sector score. This allows us to gain insights into where each sector borrows language from the other. For example, the public sector uses anglicisms to search for personnel with an IT background, such as “troubleshooting” or “cloud.” Customer orientation and service quality are mentioned occasionally. The private sector is also looking for people with the “ability to cooperate” and “empathy,” and the application process is sometimes described as rigorous, as terms like “employer’s reference,” “certificate,” or “gapless [résumé]” indicate.

5 | Discussion

From these results, we derive three important findings as follows: (1) The public and private sectors use *unique, specialized language* that applicants could interpret as sector-specific signals, especially in the public sector’s human resources needs and contact elements. We show that the identified terms predominantly align with specialized sector language, that is, the public sector uses the German “Beamtendeutsch.” (2) In these sector differences, *PSM-related themes* are more frequent in public sector job advertisements along all PSM dimensions—yet a *more rational than inspirational messaging tone* is employed. (3) The public sector often stresses incentives that applicants could interpret as “*low-cost*” signals (e.g., legal vacation entitlements and health management). In contrast, the private sector emphasizes performance-based and monetary incentives.

Thus, we bridge the gap between several literature streams through *computational methods*, for example, employer branding, signaling, and PSM, linking them to the broader public administration topics of formalization and red tape in real-life recruitment practices.

Overall, the results provide evidence of the *job market dilemma* that public sector organizations face: Choose between a strategy that increases the size of the applicant pool by offering the “same yet better” or a strategy that improves the fit and quality of applicants by shaping the recruitment message so that unsuitable candidates (e.g., those with low PSM scores) opt out (i.e., by offering something unique like PSM signals). The results suggest the public sector is not realizing its potential in the job market in either strategy.

Since job applicants in the early stages of their job search base their decision to engage with an employer on only a few criteria or cues (Athanasou 2003), looking at the factors that differentiate the public from the private sector is essential to attract potential candidates. Sievert, Buongiorno Sottoriva, and van den Bekerom (2025), for example, found no effect of gender diversity signals. This can be explained by our results, showing that both sectors include diversity-related themes in their job advertisements, making them ineffective in between-sector competition. To amplify this, the public sector frames

these affective themes rationally. Ritz et al. (2025) found that certain extrinsic incentives, such as job and social security, are effective in attracting people to switch to the public sector. Our results underscore this point, as these themes are unique to the public sector and may be especially important during times of job market crisis.

The data provide evidence against the public sector advertising fewer financial incentives than the private sector (Lee and Choi 2016). Regarding salaries, the public sector is more transparent about financial conditions as regulations determine them. Yet, more themes are present that can be considered “low-cost,” weakening the effectiveness of recruitment practices (Jaeger and Page 1996) or even resulting in negative signals about the agility, innovation, and future orientation of the public sector (Connelly et al. 2024). A possible explanation for this finding is that private sector salaries are commonly negotiated and less publicly mentioned. Other financial rewards and an attractive compensation package are indicated (e.g., career planning and bonus payment). In contrast, the low-cost themes in public sector job advertisements are attributes required by law. Moreover, the public sector may be unable to establish costly honest signals because of limited financial budgets. The structure and language of public sector job advertisements resonate with the public sector's regulatory requirements following institutional mechanisms that reinforce these logics (Connelly et al. 2011). Similarly, incentives and low-cost signals in our themes are referenced in relation to the relevant regulations and laws. This rule-following could signal high formalization and low flexibility in the public sector (Sievert et al. 2020).

The data continue to show a clear distinction between the sectors, and we cannot identify a “blurring of the sectors” (excluding hybrid organizations). Although Knies et al. (2022) observed some convergence on well-being measures, such as “soft HRM practices” remain a distinctive feature of the public sector. Together with our results, this supports Knies et al.'s (2022) assumption that the NPM debate has had little impact on the public sector promoting performance-oriented incentives. Blom et al. (2020) argue that such practices are equally effective in motivating employees across sectors. If the sectors are beginning to blur, that shift has not yet reached HRM practitioners, especially regarding the formalization of the recruiting process.

A *formalized application process* in the public sector manifests primarily in the contact element. According to Sievert et al. (2020), this could discourage job candidates from applying. In the contact element, a formalized application process could also signal a higher administrative burden throughout the selection process. Surprisingly, Sievert et al. (2020) found no significant effect of administrative burden messages on the intention to apply for a public sector job. Combined with our results, the administrative burden may be interpreted as a signal of scarcity and higher job value because not everyone is eligible for the position. At the same time, administrative burden and formalized procedures can reasonably be interpreted as signals that some applicants may experience as (or anticipate as) red tape. Earlier studies indicate that people interpret these cues in different ways: Scott and Pandey (2005) found that employees with higher levels of PSM perceive less red tape. Since red

tape is often described as a pathological form of organizational formalization, which is also associated with bureaucratic structures and processes (Kaufmann et al. 2019), formalization and bureaucracy may deter some applicants as burdensome. In contrast, others may read the same cues as procedural integrity that is compatible with public-sector values. Yet, the rational messaging tone used in those themes suggests otherwise.

The data show that all four PSM dimensions are evenly distributed in public sector job advertisements. Interestingly, the affective PSM motives are underutilized in the organizational identity element (except for social work). Instead, themes are present describing the state's fundamental tasks and structure in terms of the APM and CPI dimensions. Thus, the core idea of PSM and the public value debate is captured, but affective motives are rarely presented as part of an organizational description. The concept of a compassionate civil servant or a self-sacrificing, devoted public organization that cares for its citizens (and employees) does not seem to be part of the public sector's outwardly expressed set of values. Rather, it is something that individuals need to handle demanding jobs in the public sector. From a person-organization (P-O) fit perspective, this is problematic because, as Bright (2007) emphasizes, PSM-oriented individuals may become frustrated when they are constrained in their ability to “solve [citizens'] problems in a meaningful way” (p. 375). One possible explanation is that the Weberian, legalistic-bureaucratic logic that is largely present among German public managers does not support affective motives. As a result, they may simply be unaware of the motivating mechanism of the compassionate and self-sacrificing aspects of their work environment and therefore do not actively and inspirationally communicate these as organizational identity. This aligns with our finding that themes that could be interpreted as PSM signals, such as working in shifts or performing duties outside of regular working hours as an act of self-sacrifice, are often framed rationally through the associated laws and regulations. Thus, public job advertisements may mirror the sector's dominant institutional logic, wherein affective motives are challenging to align with the Weberian ideal of a civil service that is impersonal and neutral.

Hence, the findings are also relevant to the broader debate about how PSM is conceptualized: Public values, in the sense of a common good orientation (largely captured by CPI), are often recommended as recruitment signals because they are expected to attract individuals with a high PSM score (Ripoll et al. 2025; Ritz et al. 2023). As a result, CPI is arguably overrepresented in the empirical PSM literature. Many studies focus on this dimension, but findings on its actual impact on organizational attractiveness are mixed. Weske et al. (2020), for example, did not find a clear positive effect of CPI-related signals on perceived attractiveness. Moreover, references to the institutional context of the public sector and government structure, as also found in the data, may not effectively signal PSM because applicants should already be familiar with this information from the sector itself (Linos 2018).

Our findings nuance these arguments. We show that PSM-related signals in job advertisements are considerably more diverse than a narrow focus on CPI would suggest. This diversity reflects the broad range of tasks associated with the public

sector. At the same time, PSM-related signals are concentrated particularly in the HR needs element of our job advertisements, suggesting that public sector organizations recognize the importance of attracting PSM-oriented applicants. However, this placement is consequential. Screening-oriented messages (in the requirements element) may improve the quality of the applicant pool (Dineen and Williamson 2012) and appear to be more effective than the focus on job-related signals in the HR needs element (Petry et al. 2022). Additionally, SS signals formulated as requirements are sometimes blurred with incentives, which can make them less effective as recruitment signals (Connelly et al. 2024). Therefore, the issue is not necessarily the absence of PSM-related signals, but rather, their limited adaptation into clear, applicant-oriented recruitment signals.

Furthermore, we showed that the overall messaging tone was more rational than inspirational. Hence, in line with Asseburg et al. (2018), the effect of these signals, although not part of the analysis, should be questioned and could be considered ambiguous. The specialized language of the German public sector (Wagner 1984) may make it challenging for HR practitioners to adopt a more inspiring tone and bridge the gap between internal (culturally rooted) and external (brand-building) communication. Surprisingly, even the affective dimensions of PSM (COM and SS) were predominantly signaled with a rational messaging tone. This incongruence may violate applicants' expectations of an affective PSM signal.

While Markoulli et al. (2017) criticized a gap between theory and practice in HRM research in general, this is particularly true for the topic of PSM, as already mentioned by Christensen et al. (2017) and Ritz et al. (2016). For example, Bromberg and Charbonneau (2020) showed that HR practitioners in the public sector do not use PSM metrics as a basis for selection. The results suggest this is partially true for the sample, which provides a 'reality check' for PSM research. We showed that the normative and rational PSM dimensions (APM and CPI)—Which are important to create a person-environment (P-E) fit on the sector level—are, except for citizen orientation, not present in the requirements section of job advertisements. Moreover, to enhance the effectiveness of PSM signals, we recommend that public HR practitioners shift their focus to a more inspirational approach in between-sector competition.

5.1 | Limitations

Nonetheless, the results have limitations regarding the nature of signaling and the geographical context. First, it is challenging to attach meaning to themes, as signals can be ambiguous. Themes can evoke different associations among different people, depending on their previous experiences. Moreover, our themes are an algorithmic summary of the terms in our sample of job advertisements. At this level, it is impossible to determine the signaling costs of each signal for different organizations individually. Second, the job advertisements we analyzed may have been the product of deliberate manipulation (Rynes 1991). The analysis captures a snapshot of the current signaling practices employed by both sectors. Whether this manipulation is intentional or incidental remains uncertain and offers opportunities for future research. Finally, the German context cannot be

ignored, as a considerable number of themes relate to traditional aspects of the Weberian public administration (Asseburg and Homberg 2020) and current administrative challenges (e.g., lack of digitization).

5.2 | Future Research

Methodologically, the study follows the recent trend in public administration research toward computational analysis of job advertisements. We have added corpus linguistics methods to identify, cluster, and interpret textual differences between the sectors. Public administration research lacks comprehensive, verified datasets for applying computational methods, for example, PSM classification or tone-of-speech analysis. As a result, we had to rely on qualitative methods to translate the computational results into theoretical concepts. The collected job advertisements and labeled themes can be a starting point for building such datasets. Future research should expand the analysis to other countries and languages, adding the factor of different administrative cultures and institutions to the discussion. For example, a promising approach would be to examine the role of Confucian values and Asian political and administrative systems (Mussagulova and Van der Wal 2021). Moreover, further research should be conducted to deepen the analysis of job advertisement elements. This could provide valuable insights, such as whether experienced job applicants look at different elements of a job advertisement than early career applicants. Furthermore, as Vogel et al. (2024) have shown, it is possible to use the contact details provided in job advertisements to contact HR practitioners to explore whether (and which) factors influence the job advertisement content or whether recruiters incorporated their ideas. This could test how much language differences can be attributed to strategic manipulation. Additionally, our data could be used to survey HR managers about the signaling costs associated with each signal.

Notably, the applicant side should be investigated. Future studies should examine the role of signaling on intention to apply when manipulations based on our results are involved. At the same time, a significant amount of public workforce mobility appears to occur within sectors (AbouAssi et al. 2019). This is especially challenging as PSM signals lose relevance in a within-sector competition (Christensen and Wright 2011). Yet, we encourage practitioners to use our results also as a blueprint for within-sector competition, following the "same yet better" differentiation strategy (Wille et al. 2020). They could look at what incentives are typically emphasized (according to the data, e.g., a secure civil service status, telework, flexible work hours, and work-life balance for the public sector). Based on these themes, they could select areas where they believe they have an advantage and advertise them intensively.

As new challenges such as digital transformation and the use of AI arise, one could argue that the future employee is different from the current average public sector job applicant. Thus, further research should test whether sector-atypical signals may attract a more diverse applicant pool in terms of attitudes and skills. Practitioners and scholars alike should use cross-sector signaling carefully, as applicants are generally skeptical about the content of job advertisements (Cable and Turban 2001).

6 | Conclusion

This article uses signaling theory as a theoretical lens to provide insights into what typical sector language prevails in public sector job advertisements, how it differs from the private sector, and how it represents PSM. The results indicate that both sectors use different themes that reflect their core values and identities. Public sector job advertisements often employ language that resonates with the dimensions of PSM, while private sector job advertisements tend to prioritize performance and competitiveness. Yet, the public sector communicates PSM mainly through rational statements about administrative tasks and bureaucratic structure instead of inspirational messages. This approach may be ineffective in attracting PSM-oriented individuals seeking a more compelling narrative about their potential impact on society (Somers and Desmidt 2026). Considering the increasing adoption of AI in public sector organizations, especially for drafting texts such as job advertisements, some see great potential for easily optimizing language, while others fear content homogenization and rejection by potential applicants (Keppeler 2024). Therefore, the time is now for the public sector to decide what to signal and what language to use.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in OSF at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/4GNWT>, reference number 4gnwt. The scraper for Interamt job advertisements can be found at <https://github.com/giessmann1/interamtdb>.

Endnotes

¹ The sector tagger can label public and non-public based on the name of an organization. For this purpose, regular expressions (regex) of authority names in Germany were automatically generated from directories of the German federal administration (<https://www.govdata.de/suche/daten/abkuerzungsverzeichnis-des-bundes>) and state administrations with associated districts and municipalities (e.g., for the state of Brandenburg, see <https://service.brandenburg.de/service/de/adressen/>).

² In some cases, this led to an opening of the themes (e.g., GPT-4o recognized that the cluster containing “Communication Skills” [initial suggestion] included terms related to “Conflict Management” as well, which led to the corresponding addition).

³ For terms exclusively appearing in one sector, we adjusted the frequency in the other sector to 0.5 to be able to calculate a log ratio according to Rayson and Garside (2000).

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Appendix S1:** Descriptive statistics of job advertisements. **Appendix S2:** Industry groups of private sector job advertisements. **Appendix S3:** Distribution of sector scores. **Appendix S4:** Top signals in public sector job advertisements. **Appendix S5:** Top signals in private sector job advertisements. **Supporting Information: 1** Classification scheme. **Supporting Information: 2:** Extended list of signals in public sector job advertisements. **Supporting Information: 3:** Extended list of signals in private sector job advertisements.